

CHICKENS IN THE GARDEN: A HOBBY OR A BUSINESS?



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THE MAGAZINE FOR HOME GROWERS, MAKERS AND PRODUCERS

APRIL 2015 | ISSUE 85

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WELCOME

Welcome to the April issue of *Home Farmer*, as we usher in the first full month of spring, with longer days and more sun (we hope). It's a great time to get out onto the plot and put behind us those winter blues that thrive on darkness, cold and damp.

It's also a chance to put our imaginations into overdrive and recycle wood, metal and glass to make our plots that bit more individual, and, if our skills prove worthy, a bit more accommodating, comfortable and welcoming... unless we are allotment holders in the London Borough of Bexley, which has decided to ban recycled materials other than timber. Metal frames, stakes, plastic sheeting, window frames and glass are all banned, and the uniquely shambolic elegance of a typical British allotment will probably disappear with them. The beauty of a British allotment is not just the produce, but also the innovation with which people nurture their plots, and their Womble-like ability to source whatever is required from skips, building sites, and their own and neighbours' house clearances and renovations. Sadly, many of the affected allotment holders have already dismantled these wonderful and imaginative structures, and are unlikely to replace them with overpriced and inferior manufactured ones.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not opposed to health and safety, and I'm proud it plays an important role in our lives; 'health and safety gone mad' is when there is an absence of common sense and governance *in equal measure*. This council has reminded tenants that it's responsible for safety on the site, claiming that "items not intended for horticulture are often inappropriate". It's really a twist on the old "glass half full or half



empty" scenario – when you see an old window frame do you think "cold frame", or do you fear impending disaster? Personally, I would ban paper in offices to protect our bureaucrats from dreaded paper cuts, which really hurt.

What it comes down to is unwillingness on the part of both companies and government to stick their necks out and trust us, or make the effort to do what they perhaps really should be doing. How often have you heard the response, "We can't do that because of health and safety", or "data protection", when a request has little to do with either? It's perhaps easier to use them as a convenient excuse to say no, and hope we'll then go away.

It would be interesting to hear from any readers affected by similar decisions, or, equally important, where a council has been particularly helpful. Also, if you or any of the people on your site have built something impressive using recycled materials, send a photo to paul@homefarmer.co.uk and we shall try to use it as a tribute to the ingenuity and imagination of our allotmenters.

PAUL MELNYCZUK
Editor

hello

MARK ABBOTT-COMPTON

Mark, a keen kitchen gardener, is our newest contributor. Mark's style is down to earth and very 'Home Farmer'. His numerous videos on YouTube and his website (learn-how-to-garden.com), are a useful resource.



JOHN BUTTERWORTH

John is our DIY boffin – farming near the ever so hip Hebden Bridge in North Yorkshire, he manages to turn his woodworking/stonecrafting/DIY skills to anything we throw at him: from dry stone walling to upholstery.



DOT TYNE

Dot, together with her husband, Tim, and their three children, run a smallholding on the Welsh peninsula, where they practise what they preach: making sure their smallholding is financially viable. For more information visit: viableselfsufficiency.co.uk



HomeFarmer

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**“IT DOESN’T MATTER HOW THICK THE
TIMBER IS OR HOW ROUGH IT LOOKS
– THE BEES WON’T CARE. WHAT
THEY WILL CARE ABOUT IS IF THE
BEE-SPACE INSIDE IS NOT RIGHT”**

**CLAIRE
WARING**
DESCRIBES THE
CONSTRUCTION
OF A
FLAT-PACK
NATIONAL
BROOD BOX

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FOOD ENTERPRISE ZONES

A NUMBER OF food initiative zones are to be created to “unleash the entrepreneurial spirit of the countryside and [its] food producers”. Eleven are proposed and will be allocated grants of up to £50,000, together with planning deregulation for any businesses looking to grow.

Defra hopes this will attract investment and create jobs in rural areas, but emphasises that any decisions on what kinds of business might benefit from this will remain within the local community. As an example, it is proposed that funding in the South Downs will extend dairy production on existing farms by bringing back redundant buildings

into production and making use of so-called brownfield sites.

It is also hoped that more farm shops will open up to serve the local population. Environment Minister, Liz Truss, said: “Consumers both here and abroad want to buy Great British food. These zones will ensure we can grow more top quality produce and expand our food industry, which is worth more than £100 billion a year to the UK economy – more than cars and aerospace combined.”

She went on to describe food and farming as being at the very heart of the government’s long-term economic planning and essential for the UK’s future.



BEES DRAWN TO CITY LIFE



BEES AND BUGS are apparently thriving in urban environments, and often better than on farmland, according to research by a number of UK universities. As yet the shift from rural habitats to urban areas and its effects on bees is poorly understood, and the research was designed to shed light on the suitability of different environments for pollinators. Given the importance of bees to food production – pollinating is believed to be worth some £690 million to the economy – and the increasing coverage of urban areas, the study could prove critical for future improvement of green spaces in our towns and cities to better serve the diverse range of pollinators resident there.

The researchers found that overall the number of bees was the same across all the areas studied – urban areas, farmland

and nature reserves – but the diversity of bees was greater in urban areas. Farmland, however, was home to a greater number of rarer species – eleven discovered in farmland and just four in urban environments. In urban areas, bees were found to have foraged on a wide range of native and non-native plant species, but actually visited fewer of the available plant species than their rural counterparts, due no doubt to the wide variety of garden and municipal plants available. Ultimately, the researchers concluded that bees were drawn by the availability of both food and nesting sites, and recommended that urban provision for pollinators should, in future, form part of our national strategy in order to conserve and restore them.

CLIMATE COMMITMENT

David Cameron, Nick Clegg and Ed Miliband have jointly described climate change as a threat to not just the environment, but also to security, prosperity and the eradication of poverty. Their recent commitment to permit no more burning of coal to generate power unless it involves the use of new clean-up technology, is welcomed by environmentalists and other EU members, who had feared the UK might soften its position due to pressure from the national press and certain vocal Conservative MPs keen to adopt UKIP’s climate-sceptic position. All three politicians have stated that: “Acting on climate change is an opportunity for the UK to grow a stronger economy, more efficient and more resilient to risks ahead.” Their joint pledge, unusual so close to an election, includes seeking a global climate deal which limits temperature rises to below 2°C; working together to agree carbon budgets in accordance with the Climate Change Act; and accelerating the transition to a competitive, energy-efficient, low-carbon economy, whilst ending the use of unabated coal for power generation. The commitment was welcomed by Greenpeace director, John Sauven, who described it as marking “a turning point in the collective effort to take Britain’s energy system out of the Victorian age and into the 21st century”.



MRSA IN UK PIGLETS

IT WAS EXTREMELY worrying to hear that livestock-associated MRSA has been found in a UK herd of piglets. Any links to antibiotic use was apparently played down by leaders from the veterinary profession, who described the occurrence as not surprising. Both the British Veterinary Association (BVA) and the Pig Veterinary Society (PVS) suggested that the outbreak was due more to the success of particular bacteria than to antimicrobial use, although both did acknowledge concern about the spread of antimicrobial resistance across most species. Livestock-associated MRSA has in the past been known to affect humans, although the BVA and the PVS stated that Public Health England has described it as not being a significant threat to public health.

This view is hotly contested by other organisations, including

Save Our Antibiotics, which claimed that Defra had refused to test all pigs from countries where the disease is common, contrary to recommendations made nearly ten years ago. The fear is that these cases are only the tip of the iceberg, and recent research by French, Swiss and Dutch scientists suggests that livestock-associated MRSA is now being found in people with no connection with livestock, implying that although it was once farmers and farmworkers who were most at risk, the strain is now moving more easily from people to people. Perhaps this is what the veterinarians meant when they referred to the "success of particular bacteria". Professor Dame Sally Davies, the UK's Chief Medical Officer, warned that antibiotic resistance



poses a threat to life as we know it, and suggested that it could "cast medicine back into the Dark Ages". It seems like a good enough reason to begin testing.

STOP PRESS!
MRSA strain ST398 has been reported for the first time in pigs in England, years after British activists warned in a long report that it was likely to migrate from Europe, and after European scientists predicted correctly that this new type of MRSA could spread quickly via agriculture.



Victoria sponge or a Sunday roast it's reassuring to know that ovens and hobs are becoming more energy efficient, insulating you better from volatile energy prices while also cutting emissions."

ENERGY-SAVING OVENS

LOW QUALITY DOMESTIC ovens, hobs and range hoods are to be phased out by 2019 in a move which the EU says will be unnoticed, but which it is said should save the UK population over £1 billion in energy bills over the next fifteen years.

Levels of support for measures to reduce energy wastage are high, with a recent poll showing support from 87 per cent of the British public – higher even than support for renewable energy, which is

backed by about 80 per cent of the population. The phasing out has apparently had both the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* up in arms about a threat to the future of the typical British roast dinner due to worries about slow start-ups – perhaps they are remembering the early eco-bulbs – but the move has been welcomed by the WI, with Chair, Marylyn Haines-Evans, saying: "Whether you're turning your hand to a

LABOUR PLEDGE ON BADGER CULL

I AM FULLY aware that views on the badger cull vary from person to person, but the Labour Party have committed to ending the cull pilots, should they come to power in May, as part of their 'Pledge for Animals'.

Other animal welfare commitments in the Party's manifesto include maintaining and strengthening the ban on hunting with dogs, which the Conservatives have suggested they may repeal, and tackling

cruelty on shooting estates. A recent Ipsos MORI poll revealed that as many as 14 per cent of voters regard animal welfare as sufficiently important to determine which way they will actually vote at the General Election.

CONCERN OVER INSECTS

Three species of leaf beetle have become extinct in the UK in the last 100 years, and seven are currently regarded as critically endangered, according to a joint analysis by government agency, Natural England, and invertebrate charity, Buglife. A further thirty-five are also on the red list of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, and described as critically endangered, endangered or vulnerable. Examples include the tansy beetle, which eats a herb known as tansy and is found in only two areas of the UK (the banks of the River Ouse in York and Wicken Fen in East Anglia), and the ten-spotted beetle, which feeds on willow in lowland bogs. Aquatic insects, too, are giving cause for concern. Stoneflies are one of our largest freshwater invertebrates, and an indicator of the health of our rivers and streams, yet of thirty-four species, one is already extinct, one is vulnerable to extinction, and a third is critically endangered. Steven Falk of Buglife, said: "These reports will put a strong spotlight on those species that will become extinct over the next few decades unless we take positive action and try to reduce the many threats facing them."

Tansy beetle (Chrysolina graminis). Photo courtesy of Steven Falk and Buglife.



NEWS IN BRIEF

FALSE CLAIMS

Recent claims by Environment Minister, Liz Truss, that British food security is harmed by the spread of solar panels in the countryside have apparently been disproved by documents from her own department disclosed under a freedom of information request.

GREENPEACE

A claim by Professor Lesley Glover, former chief scientific adviser to the European Commission, that Greenpeace "repeatedly refused invitations" to discuss GM crops has been refuted. Greenpeace, in fact, attended several meetings with Professor Glover.

NEW TEST

From next year a rigorous new food GCSE welcomed by chefs will test pupils on culinary techniques, knowledge of nutrition, food traditions and kitchen safety.

GMO CHEESE

The US dairy industry is joining in legal action against Vermont's GMO labelling law, possibly because as much as a fifth of all US 'cheese' can contain vegetable oil and starch from GMO crops.

PUBLIC HOSTILITY

Although the UK government has put its support behind genetically modified crops, findings from a Food Standards Agency report suggest concern is growing amongst members of the public.

SLUGS AND SNAILS HEAD RHS POLL

ALTHOUGH SLUGS AND snails still head the list of the gardener's most frustrating pests, they are joined by a new and recent arrival – the allium leaf miner, first detected in Britain in 2002. The small, white, headless maggots of allium leaf mining flies bore into the foliage and stems of host plants, rendering them inedible, and when fully fed, the maggots turn into brown pupae, which can often be found in the stem. They were first discovered in the Midlands, but are now making their way across the country and posing a serious threat to members of the onion family, including onions, leeks, chives, shallots and garlic. Crops grown under horticultural fleece do get some protection, but it's a less than ideal solution for any keen allium fan.

The list of top pests was: ants (10th); mice/voles and the tortrix

moth caterpillar (joint 8th); the allium leaf miner (7th); aphid (6th); the rosemary beetle (5th); the lily beetle (4th); cushion scale (3rd); the vine weevil (2nd); and slugs/snails (1st). The poll is based on enquiries to RHS Gardening Advice, which had a 42 per cent increase in the number of enquiries received about pests in 2014 compared with the previous year. One possible reason for the increase could be the great gardening year, which meant more people spent more quality time in their gardens, so noticed the effects of pests more than in previous years.

Two newcomers to look out for, which did not make it into the top ten, are the box tree caterpillar and glasshouse thrips. The box tree caterpillar is a relative newcomer to the UK, originating in East Asia,



Adult vine weevil (Otiorynchus sulcatus). Photo courtesy of the RHS and Joyce Maynard.

and first spotted here in 2011. It can grow up to 3cm, and can completely defoliate box plants. Glasshouse thrips have become an increasing problem outdoors and are thriving in sheltered urban gardens, attacking a range of plants, particularly *Viburnum*, causing a silvery discolouration of the upper leaf surface.

ARE RIVERS FURTHERING ANTIBIOTIC RESISTANCE?

LARGE NUMBERS OF antibiotic-resistant bacteria have been found near a wastewater treatment works on the River Thames by scientists from Warwick's School of Life Sciences and the University of Exeter Medical School. They said that increasingly large amounts of antibiotics are being released into the environment as a result of both human and animal use, and surface run-off containing fertiliser and slurry from farms, and running into rivers, was highlighted as a worry. Professor

Elizabeth Wellington from the University of Warwick stated that antibiotic resistance occurs naturally, but there is no certainty as to how human and agricultural waste affects levels of resistance. She did, however, suggest that improvements in water treatment processes might hold the key to reducing the prevalence of resistant bacteria in the environment. Different treatment processes release varying amounts of resistant bacteria, and bacteria that have developed to survive in environments rich in metals may also possess antibiotic resistance mechanisms. It was also found that heavy rainfall which coincided with grassland seemed to raise levels of resistance, and heavy rainfall along sections of woodland seemed to reduce resistance. Overall they concluded that antibiotic resistance in rivers and streams could increase the risk of human exposure, although more research is needed.



NFAN AWARDS

DELEGATES FROM OVER 150 farm and rural attractions from around the UK gathered in Milton Keynes for the annual National Farm Attractions Network (NFAN) conference and awards, celebrating the best in farm parks and countryside attractions. The keynote speech was given by Ian Pigott, founder of Open Farm Sunday, in which he explained his reasons for setting up the open day, which has now welcomed over 1.4 million people onto UK farms. The big winner was undoubtedly Walby Farm Park in Cumbria, which walked away with three titles: best food and beverage, customer service excellence, and top award, the Jim Keetch Farm Attraction of the Year. Owner, Neil Milbourn, said: "The quality and entertainment value of farm attractions throughout the UK improves year-on-year, and to reach this standard is an amazing thing when you know how high the standard is now!"

You can find out more at: www.farmattractions.net, or www.farmsunday.org

WIN 10 PAIRS OF TICKETS TO THE EDIBLE GARDEN SHOW



THE EDIBLE GARDEN Show bursts into bloom at Alexandra Palace on 20th to 22nd March, alongside a fantastic new lifestyle event, 'Good Life Live', and we've got 10 pairs of tickets up for grabs. Perfectly timed for the start of the growing season, the event is introducing many exciting new features and attractions to its popular 'plot to plate' format, while continuing to inspire everyone from novices to dedicated gardeners with its fertile mix of celebrity speakers, and interactive 'over the fence' and 'potting shed' advice sessions. Meanwhile, 'Good Life Live' will extend the concept 'beyond the

plot' to showcase a broader range of outdoor living experiences and adventures, from country pursuits and home comforts to smallholding from its new Chicken Coop, Village Green, Family Zone and Make It features. With its barrowful of new attractions and partners, as well as a bold, eye-catching new look, it's undoubtedly going to be 'the best yet'. For more information and advanced discounted tickets visit: www.theediblegardenshow.co.uk

COMPETITION

To be in with a chance of winning one of 10 pairs of tickets to this great, value-for-money day out,



where under 16s enter for free, simply answer the question:

Which TV botanist has been present at all four Edible Garden Shows?

Please send your answer to ruth@homefarmer.co.uk, with the subject heading 'TEGS', together with your name, address, and a contact telephone number. Due to the date of the show, all entries must be received no later than **Friday 13th March 2015**.

WONDERWOOL WALES COMPETITION

WONDERWOOL WALES RETURNS in April, and we have 2 pairs of tickets on offer. To win simply answer this question: **For how long has Wonderwool Wales been running?** Go to page 50 of this month's magazine to find the answer and learn about the crafting spectacular that takes over a part of the Royal Welsh Showground in Builth Wells each year.

To enter, email your answer to ruth@homefarmer.co.uk, with the subject heading 'WONDERWOOL COMP', together with your name, address, and a contact telephone number. The deadline for entries is **Friday 3rd April 2015**. To find out more about this year's event, visit: www.wonderwoolwales.co.uk.

Photo © John Teale.

ROYAL WELSH SPRING FESTIVAL

A CELEBRATION OF rural life, the Royal Welsh Spring Festival 2015 at the Royal Welsh Showground on 16th and 17th May will be packed with entertainment, educational activities, free workshops, displays and main-ring performances, making it the perfect family day out. This year there will be over 1,300 livestock, horses and ponies, hundreds of trade stands, children's activities, a food and drink quarter, vintage machinery, an auction, country leisure and much, much more – in fact, something for everyone, no matter what your passion. But there's also a new look to this year's event, with a dedicated smallholder centre in the South Glamorgan Exhibition Hall, an artisan and street food area, a new location for the sustainable living section, a new country life area in the forestry section, an extended horse section with competitions in the main ring, a visit from popular children's favourite, Tractor Ted, a dedicated crafts and shopping zone, a half marathon race and family run, and many new livestock categories, including a novice sheep section and both Boer and Bagot goats. Visit www.rwas.co.uk/spring-festival/ to find out more, or to buy your tickets to this year's event online.



ON THE PLOT

Amazing April

John Harrison looks at the **April sowing schedule**, sources some **easy-to-grow tomatoes**, and fires off a salvo at moves to prevent allotment holders using **recycled materials** on a London site

By April things are really moving on the plot, but do be wary of the weather. One of the joys of living in Britain is that there is nothing certain about our weather. I've seen snow in late April (and the editor says he's even seen it as late as June in Lancashire), and on the same date a few years later we had blistering sunshine. So, keep the horticultural fleece handy – you might need a sunshade!

I'm all in favour of remaining both healthy and safe, but so often 'health and safety' is simply used as an excuse, and one especially loved by councils.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

There are three words that are usually guaranteed to make me see red – 'health and safety'. Or rather, to be accurate, it's their misuse that really winds me up. But please don't misunderstand me;

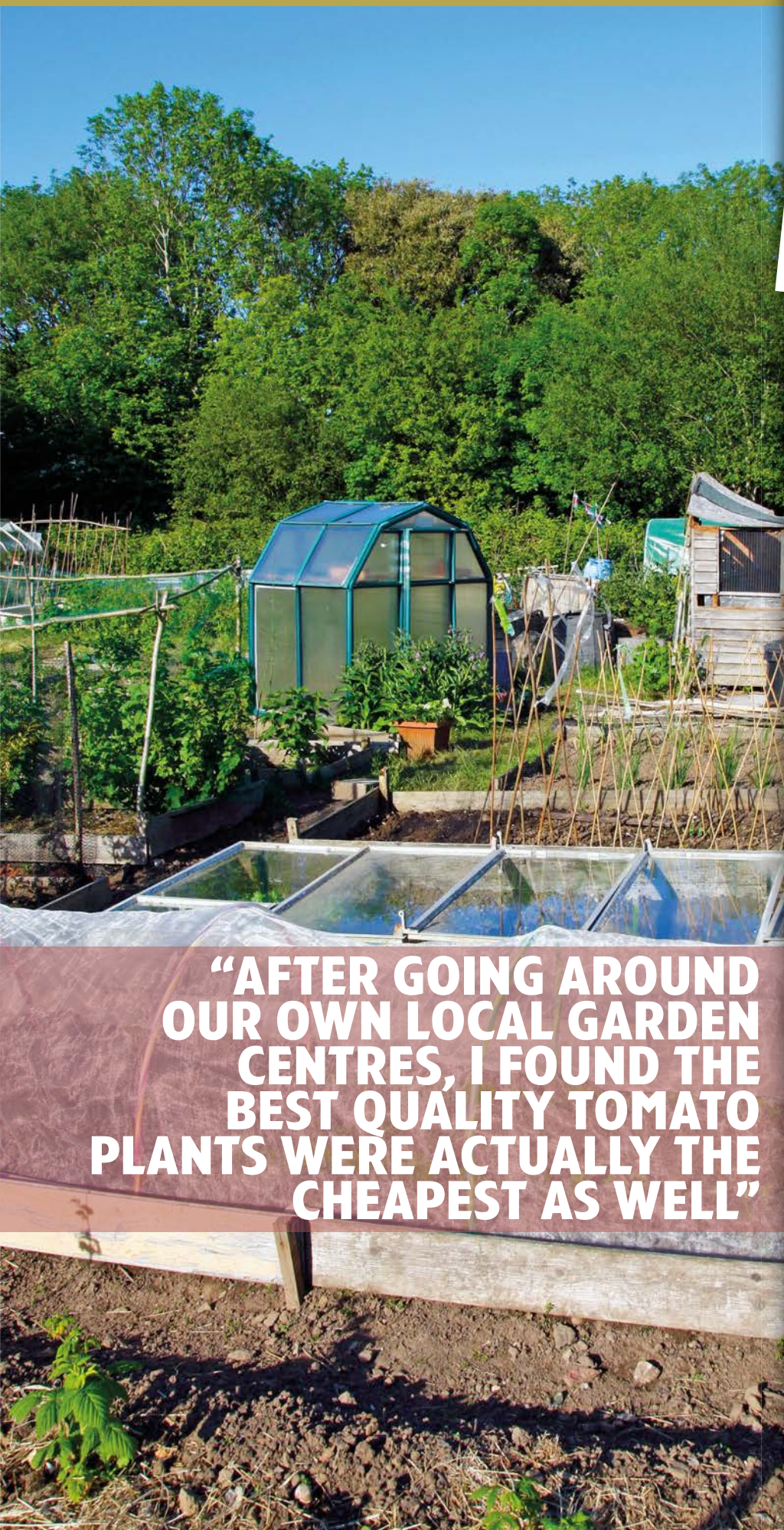


APRIL TASKS

- * Harden off any plants destined to go outside *at least* a week prior to siting them permanently, but bring them back in or protect them appropriately before it gets dark.
- * Cut down butterfly bushes (buddleia). The wonderfully straight branches will make great rustic support frames for any climbing plants – they root very easily, so beware!
- * As plants begin to grow, so do weeds. Hoe during dry weather, as weeds are more easily uprooted and will die off quickly.
- * Aim to succession sow (regular repeat sowings) popular veg and salads, as this will provide a lengthy harvest.
- * Clear out any vacant beds after the last of the winter harvests and dig in some well-rotted manure or compost to get your beds prepared for planting over the next couple of months.
- * Prepare a small herb garden, ideally just outside the kitchen – it could even be as basic as a wooden box. You can then populate it with herbs bought cheaply in the supermarket throughout the summer.

The number of times I've heard that a council doesn't allow people to keep chickens on the allotments because of health *and* safety is just one example of this. Quite what threat hens might present to allotment holders is never actually defined – perhaps it's feared they'll take over the site, mercilessly pecking hapless allotment holders to death, or worse still, escape the allotment site altogether to menace the local housing estate, terrorising the children in the school and picking off the elderly as they get left behind in the rush to escape these rampant velociraptors. We all now know they are the descendants of some pretty fearsome dinosaurs, but that was sixty-five million years ago – let it go!

The latest example that I've been told about, concerns a London council whose latest pronouncement to its allotment holders starts: *"The council has an obligation to ensure that all persons are reasonably safe on its allotments. This requires that we remove any obvious hazards. That duty extends to ensuring that*



Tomatoes

Some years back I was lucky enough to visit a major commercial tomato grower, and was given a guided tour. They were growing a variety called 'Cedrico', which was approved by the supermarkets for its shelf life, appearance and flavour. Unlike you and I, who would be happy to get five trusses from a plant, they were actually getting twenty-two trusses per plant!

One of the factors in achieving this amazing productivity was the rootstock. To power the plants they used a specially bred tomato variety cultivated only for the root quality, and they grafted those rootstocks onto the 'Cedrico' plants. If you're buying plants rather than growing from seed, it's certainly worthwhile checking out suppliers like Suttons for similar plants, as a grafted variety of tomato will have greater vigour than the same variety on its own rootstock, and will also be more productive.

It's also well worth your time checking out and comparing garden centres if you're buying-in plants. After going around our own local garden centres, I found the best quality tomato plants were actually the cheapest as well – less than half the price of some of their rivals, in fact! Sadly, the offerings in a certain DIY mega-shed's garden centre section were hardly fit for the compost bin, never mind planting on. I think they must have been watered when it rained!

“AFTER GOING AROUND OUR OWN LOCAL GARDEN CENTRES, I FOUND THE BEST QUALITY TOMATO PLANTS WERE ACTUALLY THE CHEAPEST AS WELL”



Middle: The ingenuity and talent of home farmers – this was built by reader Peter Webber.



extraneous and dangerous items are not brought onto site. Items not intended for horticulture are often inappropriate.”

That seems reasonable enough on the surface, but don't forget that the road to hell is paved with good intentions...

The council continues, by saying: “We can no longer permit tenants to use or take onto the allotment site any recycled materials, other than timber.” The following are just some of these hazardous items: “...all metal frames, individual metal stakes,

all carpet, all plastic sheeting including window frames used as cloches, glass, car tyres, etc. The council will only permit the use of metal frames if they have been specifically made and sold for horticultural purposes.”

Now, anyone who has had the dubious pleasure of removing carpet laid as a weed suppressant or compost heap

“THERE ARE THREE WORDS THAT ARE USUALLY GUARANTEED TO MAKE ME SEE RED – HEALTH AND SAFETY”

Top Tip!

It's always worth your while checking out and comparing garden centres if you're buying-in tomato plants: prices and quality vary greatly.

SOW/PLANT IN APRIL

OUTDOORS

Asparagus, beet spinach, beetroot, broad beans, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, chard, globe and Jerusalem artichokes, kale, kohlrabi, leeks, lettuce, onion and shallot sets, peas, radish, rocket and spinach.

UNDER COVER IN THE GREENHOUSE, COLD FRAME OR POLYTUNNEL

Aubergine, celery, French and runner beans, outdoor cucumbers, lettuce, sweetcorn and tomatoes (if you've not already done them).

OUTDOORS UNDER A CLOCHE (IN GOOD WEATHER)

Celery, French and runner beans, outdoor cucumbers, lettuce and sweetcorn.



Radish seedlings.



Celery seedlings.



Outdoor cucumber seedling.

John Harrison



blanket some years back, but which is now thoroughly overgrown, will agree wholeheartedly that old carpets are not the best things to come across on a site, and there's also a good argument for banning old car tyres as well, since disposing of them if the plot holder leaves the site can be difficult; but as for the rest of their list?

For me, one of the beauties of a British allotment site is the imaginative use of 'rubbish' press-ganged into service. Indeed, is there such a thing as rubbish any more in a modern recycling economy? Old TV aerial poles can become part of a frame for runner beans or a makeshift support for a fruit cage, and cloches and cold frames can be made for next to nothing using old windows removed when the double glazing went in. Lean-to greenhouses made from scrap and plastic sheeting can be seen resting against sheds made (or repaired) using bits of old pallets and anchored down with old angle iron bars. And things you might never imagine, like the legs off a set of old stools, can be used along with some bamboo poles to support anti-pigeon netting – just about everything has a use; it's just up to someone to find it, but now that's going to be stopped. Does anybody know of anyone actually getting injured by recycled materials on an allotment? Is it as common as paper cuts in council offices?

What could be greener than rescuing something from a skip or bin to produce health-giving organic food? Of course, no one wants allotment sites used as a dumping ground for rubbish, but these blanket rules imposed from above serve no one well – certainly not the plot holders they are intended to protect. Give me an allotment site that looks like a shanty town any day.

We're now into the gardening season, so it's really time to get your skates on if you're going to pursue that New Year's resolution of self-sufficiency. John Harrison's special offer to veg growers, both new and experienced, combines the absolute best of both worlds – his own extensive expertise in a pocket-size, portable form, together with a generous selection of seeds courtesy of Suttons to put it all into practice. John will even cover the postage costs too. Here are just a few of the comments his popular books have attracted:

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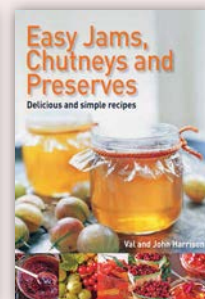
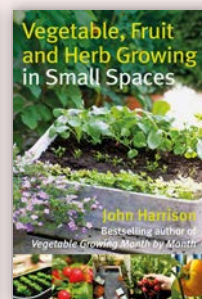
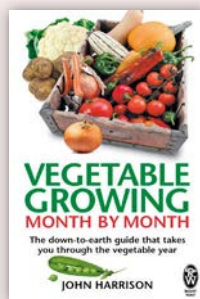
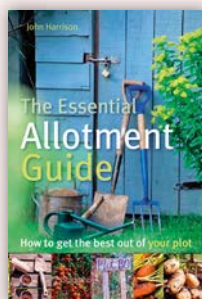
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POTTING ON

In the urban garden

This month **Mike Clark** considers **containers** and the best **growing medium** as he sets about **potting on the peas** he sowed just last month

Last month I promised to help you move your seedlings from the windowsill and into containers. And indeed I shall, but first I think we should take a wee bit of time out to consider precisely which containers will be best for the task. And what should a container be? It doesn't actually have to be a pot, and most definitely it doesn't need to be something you have to buy.

In times gone by, while gutting a house, I salvaged sinks (their use is obvious), and toilets too (which are equally obvious, surely, though the drainage hole is really too large and needs some crocks or, better still, some chunks of broken polystyrene packaging to turn the dump-hole – if you'll pardon the expression – into a properly draining container). And have you ever wondered what to do with your old drawers? Only your imagination need ever limit you.

In fact, you don't even need pots. You can grow food in just about any structure that is strong enough to hold a lump of growing medium in place.

Immediately that raises two questions – what is such a structure, and what is a growing medium?

Let's take the second first.

GROWING MEDIA

The primary growing medium is the soil which our planet provides for us. It has taken millennia to create, and varies from location to location. Your soil may have been created as a result of glacial activity slowly grinding rocks into small particles, which eventually become clays, or from vegetation dying and rotting down to produce what we now call peat, or, indeed, rising and falling seas and eroding seashores, which result in silts. But I'm a gardener, not a geologist, so forgive me for this dramatic oversimplification.

All of these can certainly be very productive in the appropriate place, but not in pots, alas! Pots are a human invention – a mere snapshot of nature's great growing environment.

We invented pots, and we have to accept that we simply cannot replicate the work of many millennia without compromise, and that compromise is this: sadly, you really cannot just fill a couple of containers with a few shovels of garden soil and expect results.

There is no perfect recipe for a growing medium, but I would start with 50% home-made garden compost. I do, however, appreciate that not everyone has the space for making their own, although composting barrels and similar devices can be used perfectly well on a patio. Invest in a bag of general multi-purpose compost (most garden centres sell two for a tenner or less), but don't use it neat. Mix it with whatever garden soil you already have, or any other decayed organic matter you can find. Is there perhaps a wood nearby? If so, then there will be leaf-mould. Obviously, I have to say please ask permission first, but what you get up to at night with a head



“ALL ORGANIC MATTER CAN GO INTO THE POT. JUST THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX”

torch has got to be none of my business. Better still, is there one of those local authority gutter-cleaning machines going by? Make friends with those guys by offering them a cuppa.

If they'll give you some of their prized pickings, that's next year's growing medium sorted. Compost the stuff for a year, then all you have to do is pick out the plastic and any other bits of human detritus. Just get your Marigolds on and go for it.

A step too far, perhaps? Okay. My recipe for your pots is 50% bought compost, plus 50% of whatever you can scrape together from the environment in which you live. Only got a balcony? Then scrape off the moss.

All organic matter can go into the pot. Just think outside the box.

Now we'll take the first point, second.

CONTAINERS

Anything that can hold some growing medium together is potentially a 'container'. You don't need real pots, although they are undoubtedly very useful in gardening. If you ever buy something from the garden centre in a pot, please don't chuck it in the bin. If you can't make use of it, someone else

will, and there are many charities out there crying out for unwanted pots.

Any old bucket will do, and will provide you with veg. The most important thing is drainage, and you must, before using an old pail or similar, drill some drainage holes in the base... and when you think you have drilled enough, drill 50% more! Drainage is absolutely crucial to success when growing in containers.

So, take an old pail – a 5-litre emulsion bucket is great, but wash it out well – and drill many drainage holes in

the base. Not been painting lately?

Beg or borrow some offcuts of stock fencing or rabbit netting and make a cylinder. Ideally, you can make the joints with tying wire, but string will do. Now, turn an old compost bag inside out, make lots of drainage holes in the bottom, and use it to line the wire cylinder. Whatever material you use, never forget to make the drainage holes!

So, why turn the bag inside out? Well, apart from the aesthetics, these bags are black on the inside, and black



Above: Line a wire frame with a compost bag to make a useful container.

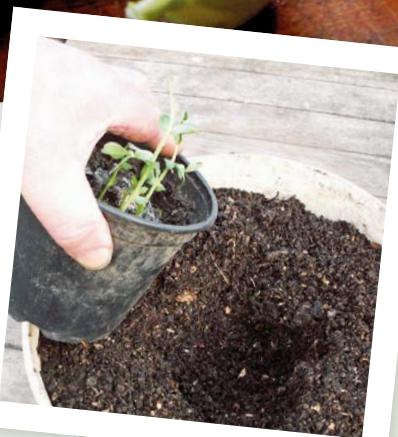
Left: An old pail makes a good container, but drill plenty of drainage holes.

AND NOW FOR THE PEAS

Last month we sowed some peas on the windowsill. These are now ready to move on to their final pot. Fill a container of your choice with a good mix of compost and other substances, as described above. Just knock the pot of pea seedlings, soil and all, out of their container as smoothly as possible. Never try to separate seedlings, as this will almost certainly disturb the roots. Next, plant that pot of peas in the centre of the container.

Peas are climbing plants and will need something to hug. Use bamboo canes or some straight prunings – I use willow because I have an abundance of it, but hazel, dogwood and buddleia are all good home-grown alternatives. Just use five or so to make a wee wigwam, and tie them together at the top. As the peas grow, tease them apart and gently train them onto the supports. You may have to tie them gently at first so they know where to go, but soon they will use their tendrils to cling to the supports.

Dwarf pea varieties are most suitable for containers, and we'll look at dwarf varieties generally in due course. Once the peas reach the top of the wigwam, you can then just pinch the tops out, which will encourage them to make new growth lower down, thereby giving greater cropping potential. And the bonus? Well, pea shoots are a tasty addition to any salad, so don't pinch and discard: pinch and eat!





Remember!

The primary growing medium provided by our planet is the soil – it's taken millennia to create, and varies from location to location.



Above: Any potatoes started early can now be planted in a container.



Right: Plant the potato halfway down the pot, then top up the compost as the plant grows. Remember to cover it overnight with fleece or bubble wrap if frost is forecast.

draws heat *from* the sun, while white *repels* it. Black is good. Black is warm, and warm is good. Always turn the black *outside*.

You can use old compost bags, inside out, to line just about anything which would not, in itself, retain compost. Even a stout cardboard box will hold up for a season with a polythene liner. And feel free to substitute a strong, recycled bin liner for the compost bag, but always remember to make drainage holes.

TATTIES

I hope you have already started an early tattie or two in pots on the windowsill. Call me sad, if you like, but for me the first early potato, from pot to plate, is better than six portions of my five-a-day. You can keep your supermarket Pembrokes and Jersey Royals. No supermarket can give you tatties in twenty minutes, from tuber to tummy.

NEXT MONTH

We'll look at growing tatties in pots, and dwarf varieties of all vegetables – the type best suited to growing in containers, but certainly no less tasty and healthy than their larger counterparts.



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WILDLIFE

An under cover story

Polytunnels and **greenhouses** can be a **haven** for **wildlife**, and nurturing a healthy **ecosystem** can benefit your **plants**. **Kate Collyns** looks at how to create a perfect **balance** between **crops** and **nature**

A polytunnel or greenhouse in your garden means shelter for all kinds of wildlife, not just your crops, and you'll find that hundreds of different species will make your covered paradise their new home. Some are definitely to be encouraged and looked after, since they keep unwanted pests at bay and can help your plants prosper in a number of ways.

SLUG HUNTERS

A small pond or other regular water source is a great asset to have near your tunnel or greenhouse, and some people even build one inside their tunnel. It's often said that creating a pond is the single best thing you can do to encourage wildlife to visit your garden: birds, hedgehogs and amphibians such as toads and frogs love ponds. They are also slug hunters, and will either eat adult slugs or their eggs, so they are brilliant for helping to keep populations of these serious pests in check. Dig a hole at least 30cm deep, with at least one shallow-shelved side for animals such as hedgehogs to use, then line it with pond liner or leftover polytunnel plastic.

Fill it with rainwater and include some oxygenating pondweed and some stones for tadpoles and frogs to hide under, and for birds to perch on.

Blackbirds, thrushes, toads and frogs are perhaps the most voracious predators of slugs and snails, and smaller finches and tits will feast on caterpillars and other bothersome grubs such as leatherjackets. Keep doors open during the day to allow birds and other predators in, especially in spring and summer, and an upturned flowerpot in a damp corner makes a nice toad and frog hotel. If you have a problem with mice or voles eating your plants, you may even find that keeping the doors open at night in summer allows the odd owl in to raid your covered growing areas, and for the local bats to feast on moths.

SOIL STARS

It's not just the large animals that devour slug and snail eggs: many ground beetles are also your friend when it comes to keeping slimy pests in check. Many beetles like damp corners, and shady areas such as under logs

or stones. A cool woodpile or rockpile near your tunnel or greenhouse will be a welcome attraction and breeding ground for many species of beetle.

Providing plenty of organic matter, mulches and compost for your soil is vital for these and other useful friends: a healthy ecosystem in your soil will mean a healthy ecosystem on top of the soil too, as beneficial fungi and bacteria can keep on top of harmful soilborne microbes and diseases. Just as antibiotics can kill off beneficial gut bacteria in our bodies as well as the harmful bacteria, so the same applies to the soil; where possible keep pesticides and fungicides to a minimum, and concentrate on feeding the soil with well-rotted manures, green waste composts and leaf mulches. Worms will especially appreciate these moisture-retaining mulches, and (along with other soil biota) will return the favour by turning compost and manure into food for plants, and will also provide air holes in the soil that roots can penetrate and exploit. Charcoal finings or biochar can also be added to the soil to provide a 'hotel' for beneficial microbes, as well as allowing good drainage and aeration – and as a further plus point, slugs don't like charcoal either.



“SOME PLANTS NEED POLLINATING INSECTS TO HELP THEM SET FRUIT, AND THIS CAN BE DIFFICULT WHEN THE PLANTS ARE COSSETED UNDER COVER RATHER THAN IN THE OPEN”

Unfidy!

Don't be too neat and tidy – a pile of rotting wood, or a patch of overgrown weeds, can provide a home for beneficial wildlife.

PERFECT POLLINATORS

Some plants need pollinating insects to help them set fruit, and this can be difficult when the plants are cosseted under cover rather than in the open. Entice pollinators such as bees, hoverflies and butterflies into your tunnel or greenhouse by planting attractive flowers near the doors (and some inside too, if possible) to help get your crops noticed. Favourites for a number of beneficial insects are calendula (above right), borage (above far right), cornflowers, tagetes and umbellifers – so you could simply leave some parsley or carrots to flower, or plant a few marigolds along the edge of the tunnel. Calendula and tagetes have also proven to be useful when combating aphids and blackfly – supposedly because the strong aroma attracts the pests away from your crops.

Aphids and blackfly are also favourite meals for ladybirds and their larvae, which like to overwinter in hollow stems and are quite happy hibernating among calendula in the warmth of the polytunnel. Solitary mason bees are also

good pollinators and like wider hollow stems for their homes – a few short pieces of bamboo cane bunched up and left in a quiet place inside or near the greenhouse or tunnel is ideal.

MINDFUL MESSINESS

Wildlife does tend to flourish on a rough, unkempt patch of ground, where animals can hide and mind their own business. Although it's tempting to keep everything neat and tidy, a little pile of rotting wood under a propagating

bench in your greenhouse, or a small patch of overgrown weeds somewhere near the covered growing area, can benefit your plants hugely: ladybirds will enjoy hollow nettle stems, while pollinating insects will be attracted to the various wild flowers that bloom at different times of the year; and amphibians, hedgehogs and birds can hide there before making their next slug raid. Secretive wasps also like to overwinter in hedges and rough patches, before feeding on pests in the spring, such as cabbage white caterpillars.



CLIMBING BEANS

Climbing or French beans (thought of as a more elegant version of runner beans) set long, thin pods (although some varieties are flat like runner beans), which can be eaten whole or sliced, either raw or lightly cooked. They come in a range of colours, such as green, yellow and purple – although the purple colour turns to green when cooked. Some varieties, such as the pretty, mottled borlotti bean, are usually left to mature on the plant,

and then the seeds are dried (although the whole young pods can be eaten): these are known as borlotti, haricot or flageolet beans.

If sowing in pots or large modules, start sowing them indoors from mid March, ready to plant out in late April after the frosts, or in early April if sowing direct in the ground under cover. All bean plants are hungry and like plenty of compost or manure worked into the soil beforehand, and they don't like to get too dry. They are

also a great favourite of slugs, so regular early evening patrols will be required.

Climbing beans need support, as their name suggests: either up canes like runner beans, or up strong netting. They need very little maintenance when grown under cover, since they won't suffer from wind- or rabbit-damage like outdoor crops, but you will probably need to tie the first long shoots to canes or netting until they find their own way there. The fragrant

flowers are popular with bumblebees, which help pollinate the crop.

Harvest the beans from July onwards by picking them off whole as soon as they plump up, and before they become too rigid and unpalatable; continuous picking should mean the plants will keep going until September.

My own personal favourite varieties include 'Blauhilde' (purple), 'Cobra' (green), 'Neckargold' (yellow) and 'Borlotti Lingua di Fuoco' (green and red).



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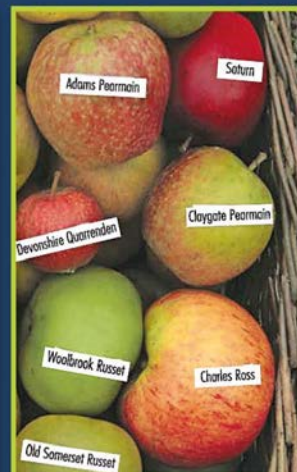
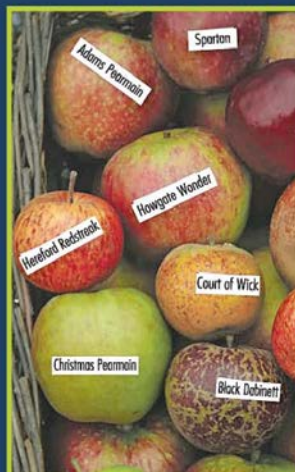
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BEETROOTS

They're beautiful!

Elizabeth McCorquodale grows and prepares **beetroot** – one of the **original superfoods** in the days before each veg had its own PR company!

Beets have been cultivated and written about in one form or another for a good 3,000 years, and apart from a few departures from common sense (English herbalists, Culpeper and Gerard, suggested snuffing beetroot juice up the nose to cure headaches!) it has had a fairly easy ride compared to most veggies through the ages. That said, the vegetable we now recognise as beetroot is a relatively new breeding triumph that didn't appear until the late 1500s.

Beets started life as sea beets, a plant that still grows wild around the Middle East and North Africa, and also through Europe and all the way up to our own chillier shores. Beets were originally grown just for their leaves, as the taproots were long and rather weedy, not full and plump as they are today. The sea beet, the leaf beet (Swiss chard), the sugar beet and the fodder beet (also known as the mangold or mangel-wurzel) are all subspecies of the same vegetable, botanically recognised

as *Beta vulgaris*, and each subspecies has been selected over the years for a specific purpose. Our beet is rather charmingly known as *Beta vulgaris vulgaris*.

I love beetroot tops and bottoms, and I am never without them in the kitchen at any time of year. Pickling beets isn't the only way to ensure a good supply through the winter; it is simplicity itself to spread a 30–45cm layer of straw over the beetroot bed in late autumn, which will allow you to continue to crop through the cold months.

Don't peel or cut fresh beetroot before cooking, as all the colour will leak out into the cooking liquid – unless, of course, you intend to use the broth. Instead, clean them by scrubbing them just as you would new potatoes, then twist off the greens, rather than slicing off the tops.

Cooking beets is simple: just boil them in their skins for about 45 minutes, or roast parboiled beets in a hot oven with olive oil and garlic, or bake raw, peeled beets in foil in a medium oven for 1–1½ hours.

BEETS IN CARAWAY, GARLIC AND YOGHURT

This makes just about the best beetroot salad you could possibly have.

INGREDIENTS

2 cups thick Greek yoghurt
8 medium-sized beets, cooked and cubed
1 heaped tsp crushed caraway seeds
1 clove garlic, minced
Salt and pepper (to season)



METHOD

- 1 Combine the crushed caraway seeds, garlic and yoghurt in a large bowl, then stir in the beets.
- 2 Combine well and leave to stand for about 1 hour to allow the flavours to develop.
- 3 Season with salt and pepper and serve as part of a salad plate. Delicious!

'BORSCHTLESS' BEETROOT SOUP

Not every beetroot soup is borscht; indeed, every borscht recipe is not borscht... there are dozens and dozens of recipes that go under this name: some veggie, some made with fish stock, some with beef stock; some chunky, some smooth; some served hot, some cold. It all depends on the region that it came from. In order to avoid any arguments, this soup is simply beetroot soup to be enjoyed hot. You can use any colour beet, though there is something very beautiful about the deep pink of traditional dark-red beets.

INGREDIENTS

Olive oil
1 large onion, finely chopped
500g raw beetroot, coarsely grated
4 cups very good vegetable stock
3 bay leaves
1 tbsp cider vinegar
1 tsp mustard seeds
1 tsp cumin seeds
Salt and freshly ground pepper

1 tbsp freshly grated horseradish, or
1½ tbsp horseradish from a jar
½ cup thick Greek yoghurt

METHOD

- 1 Prepare a horseradish cream by combining the horseradish and yoghurt, then set it aside for the flavour to develop.
- 2 Fry the mustard seeds and cumin seeds in the olive oil until the first seeds pop, then add the onion and fry gently until transparent.
- 3 Add the grated beetroot, stock and bay leaves, then bring to a slow simmer. Cook for about 30 minutes until the beets are very soft.
- 4 Add the vinegar and salt and pepper, then bring back to a simmer for a further 1 minute.



Serve topped with a spoonful of the horseradish cream.

SUNSET SALAD

This is a really bright and colourful treat, and it's delicious too!

INGREDIENTS

2 large, juicy oranges, washed
5 small beetroots, washed
2 tbsp orange juice
1 tbsp light olive oil

METHOD

- 1 Cut the leaves off the beetroots and cook them in boiling water until tender, then leave to cool. Don't cut into the root at all or the juice will run away as they are being cooked.
- 2 Once cooled, cut the stump of leaves from the top of the beetroot, then slip the skins off and discard them. Cut each beet into chunks and place in a serving bowl.
- 3 Cut the skin from the top and bottom of the oranges, then rest one orange on the bottom cut surface and cut away the remaining skin by sawing down between the skin and the flesh. Discard the skin and cut the flesh into ½cm pieces, removing the pips and as much of the bitter white pith as possible.
- 4 Do the same to just half of the remaining orange, but with the remaining half, do not remove the skin – instead, cut the whole thing into smaller pieces (skin and all).
- 5 Toss the oranges together with the beetroot, orange juice and olive oil, and leave for 1 or 2 hours to allow the flavours to develop.



BEST BEET VARIETIES

BARBABIETOLA DI CHIOGGIA

Red outside, with pink and white rings inside.

BOLTARDY

Probably the most popular variety – slow to bolt and good for an early sowing.

ALBINA VEREDUNA

A white, globe-shaped variety.

BURPEE'S GOLDEN

A striking, luminescent yellow inside.

ALTO

A traditional beet with long, sweet roots.

MONETA

A monogerm variety with just one seedling per seed. For anyone who dislikes thinning, this is the ideal beet. Stores well in the ground through winter.

For smaller gardens with big ideas, many seed merchants now offer packs of seed which contain a selection of every colour of beetroot, often known as 'Rainbow Beets' or 'Rainbow Mix'.



Growing

“DON'T PEEL OR CUT FRESH BEETROOT BEFORE COOKING, AS ALL THE COLOUR WILL LEAK OUT INTO THE COOKING LIQUID”

Beets are half-hardy biennials grown as annuals and come in many shapes, colours and sizes. The sweetest, most tender beets are harvested at golf ball size, and to have a steady supply this size requires succession sowing every 2–4 weeks, beginning about 2 weeks before the date of the average *last* frost, and continuing right up until about 6–8 weeks before the date of the average *first* frost – where I garden in the Cotswolds that gives me a nice long sowing season of about 20 weeks.

Beets like a slightly acid to neutral pH (between 6 and 7 on the scale), and a good, friable, moist soil in a sunny spot. Most beet seeds are multigerm, which means that each seed will produce more than one seedling. This can be seen as a bother (more thinning) or an advantage (more chances of viable seedlings and more baby greens for salads). The seeds are corky and large, and soaking them for several hours before sowing will soften the seed coat and improve germination. Plant them about 2.5cm apart, then thin to about 5cm apart for baby beets, and about 10cm for tennis ball size beets, in rows about 20cm apart. Pinch the seedlings off rather than pull them so that you don't disturb the remaining seedlings.

Your soil should be enriched with good, rich kitchen compost rather than manure, and if the season is particularly hot and dry, use the same compost to top-dress around the roots to preserve moisture. A dry soil will encourage bolting (early flowering) and tough roots. Beets are largely free of pests and diseases, but if you do notice holes appearing in the leaves of your crops, you can solve the problem by laying a floating fleece over the bed, and be sure to leave it in place for the season.

FURTHER INFO

For more examples of Elizabeth's photography and articles, together with the books she has written, visit www.elizabethmccorquodale.com

BEETROOT BROWNIES

Yup, beetroot brownies! All I can say is, "try them" – they are truly delicious and rather rich!

INGREDIENTS

250g dark chocolate, broken into small pieces
250g butter
250g sugar
3 eggs, beaten
150g self-raising flour
250g cooked beetroot, peeled and finely grated

METHOD

- 1 Put the grated beetroot into a colander to drain.
- 2 Preheat the oven to 180°C and grease a 20cm × 25cm cake tin. Line the bottom with baking paper.
- 3 Put the chocolate and butter in an ovenproof bowl and melt them in the warming oven, then stir and set aside.
- 4 Cream the eggs and sugar together in a bowl until light and fluffy, then add the chocolate mixture, stirring until smooth.
- 5 Fold in the flour, then the beetroot, and stir until just mixed.
- 6 Pour the mixture into the cake tin and bake in the oven for about 30 minutes, or until a knife pushed into the middle comes out clean.

BEETROOT JELLY

This can be used in a salad or as a pudding – it's tasty and refreshing either way.

INGREDIENTS

4 cooked beetroots, grated
1 apple, peeled and grated
1 crisp pear, peeled and grated
1 pint raspberry jelly
Flavourless oil (for brushing)



METHOD

- 1 Lightly oil a shallow, 1-pint dish.
- 2 Make the jelly and pour into the dish.
- 3 Add the beetroot, apple and pear, stirring well to distribute the beetroot and fruit evenly around the dish. Refrigerate until set.

Serve along with a salad, or as a pudding on its own.

PUFFY BEETROOT AND FETA SPLATS

These are good enough for a dinner party, but easy enough for everyday use.

INGREDIENTS

1 packet ready-made puff pastry
1 egg (for brushing)
100g cooked peas
150g feta cheese, roughly crumbled
100g cooked beetroot, drained
A large bunch of salad leaves – such as baby beetroot leaves, rocket and spinach
1 tsp good cumin seeds
1 tbsp oil
Seasoning

METHOD

- 1 Combine the oil, cumin seeds and seasoning in a small bowl and set aside.
- 2 Preheat the oven to 210°C and line a baking tray with baking parchment.
- 3 In a larger bowl, combine the beetroot and peas, then gently stir in the feta. Coat in the oil and seasonings and set aside.
- 4 Roll out the pastry, then cut out four 12cm circles and place them on the lined baking tray.
- 5 Using a knife, carefully score around the rim of each circle, 1cm away from the edge (take great care not to cut all the way through!). Brush all over with beaten egg.
- 6 Pile the filling mixture into the centre of each pastry circle, ensuring that the edges are free of any filling. Bake in the oven for 20–25 minutes until the pastry is browned and the feta is just browning on the corners.

Serve by filling 4 plates with the salad leaves topped with a beet and feta splat.



MAKING THE MOST OF BEETROOT

- * Don't forget the tops! Baby greens are a lovely addition to salads, and mature beet tops are a delicious and nutritious treat, which are used in exactly the same way as chard.
- * It may not be saying much these days when every other fruit or vegetable is claimed by someone, somewhere, to be the new superfood... but taken regularly, beet juice seems to help lower blood pressure. Mind you, drinking the recommended half a litre of

beetroot juice daily is rather a lot to ask, but, luckily, eating three medium-sized beets will do the same job.

- * Beets make a super food colouring: try adding a small, raw beetroot to your potatoes before you boil them up for mashing; or add a bit of chopped beetroot to chopped apples before you make them into apple sauce to turn it a pretty pink; or use the juice from sweet young beets to colour your icing.



GROW SPUDS

using no-dig beds

Reduced intervention in **no-dig beds** has been found to **preserve** the precious **ecosystem** of your soil. This month **Mark Abbott-Compton** uses **no-dig beds** to grow **potatoes**

I learned how to grow potatoes in no-dig beds from my grandfather – he, in turn, was first exposed to this method of bed construction and growing at The Royal Show back in 1948. It's a really great way to grow first earlies and second earlies: there's less maintenance involved when compared with a traditional bed, and the yields are certainly at least as good, if not better.

HOW TO CONSTRUCT A NO-DIG BED

The construction of a no-dig potato bed is very simple. The starting point is to create four sides using pieces of wood between 5cm and 15cm in width. You can even create it without putting any sides on at all, but when I did this

it produced an untidy bed and a significantly smaller yield.

Next, lay some wet cardboard straight onto the ground. This needs to be three layers deep to stop weeds

growing up. The cardboard should be covered with well-rotted farmyard manure to a depth of 10–15cm. If you are fortunate enough to have some large, home-made compost heaps, you can use compost instead.

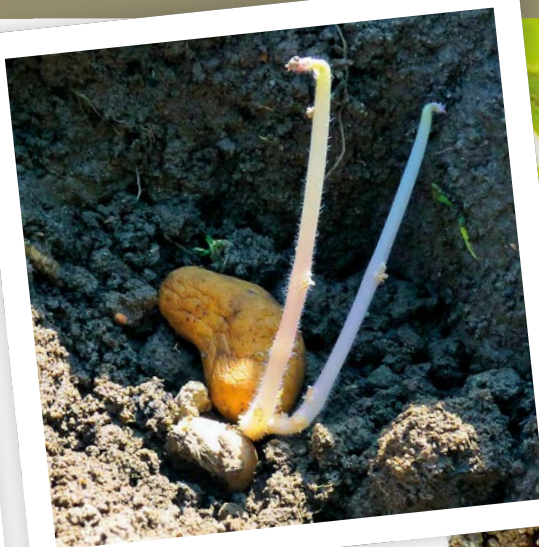
Finally, add the planting layer – this can be either used growbags and composted leaf-mould, or proprietary compost. The planting layer is the layer into which we will be planting the seed potatoes.

POTATO TYPES BY GROWING TIMES

Potatoes will be one of three basic types: first earlies, second earlies or maincrop potatoes. These descriptions simply denote the amount of time the potatoes take to

Spud types!

Potatoes come in three types: first earlies, second earlies, and maincrop. These names denote the amount of time they take to mature.



mature, and first earlies – varieties like ‘Sharpe’s Express’ or ‘Charlotte’ (a great favourite of chefs) – can produce tubers in as little as 10 weeks. Normally, though, it takes 12–14 weeks of growing before the tubers appear. Second earlies can take 14–16 weeks, and maincrop potatoes can take anywhere from 16 to 24 weeks to produce tubers.

TO CHIT, OR NOT TO CHIT

Chitting simply refers to ‘breaking the dormancy’ of the tuber and allowing it to sprout before planting. To do this, simply take your seed potatoes and place them in some egg-boxes in a light,

cool, frost-free room or shed, then remove all but the strongest shoots.

Research now shows there is no real advantage to chitting second early or maincrop varieties, as it doesn’t increase yield or shorten growing time. However, with first earlies it is beneficial to chit them, and your first earlies could be planted as early as February if you’re planting in a greenhouse or polytunnel. This is a perfect way to get those first new potatoes, and you can also grow them in a bag or container in this manner.

For most potato growers, and certainly for anyone growing outside,



COASTAL FERTILISERS

If you live near the coast, one of the best fertilisers available for your potato beds is fresh seaweed. Simply collect the seaweed and pile it onto the crop. Some of the very best-tasting potatoes in the world are grown this way: from the early Jersey Royals, which are grown on south-facing slopes in Jersey, to the Île de Batz, which lies off the coast of Brittany. The potato grown here is ‘Ratte’, also known as ‘Asparges’ or ‘Cornichon’, which is renowned in Parisian vegetable markets for its wonderful chestnut taste.

Another island where they grow potatoes is Chiloe – which is off the coast of Chile – and over 200 varieties of potato are grown there. They even have a unique measurement for potatoes – the *almud*, which is equivalent to 5kg. This unit of measurement was apparently inherited from the conquistadors and is not used anywhere else in South America.

I use seaweed as a fertiliser on a regular basis, as I live close to the Cornish coast, and it is easy to collect it for my no-dig beds.





first earlies can be planted in mid March, second earlies can be planted about two weeks later, and maincrops about two weeks after second earlies. This, of course, varies according to how far north or south you live. First earlies are ideal for planting in containers, but should be kept well away from frost.

WATERING AND FEEDING POTATOES

When it comes to watering and feeding, you will produce a much better crop if this is done regularly. One of the advantages of growing potatoes in a no-dig bed is that no-dig beds have large amounts of humus, which holds more moisture than traditional beds. This makes watering less important, and in times of drought – or when the tubers are swelling – it can make a significant difference to the size of your crop.

The best way to improve the size of your potato crop is to use a liquid feed in the growing phase. I use either a liquid seaweed feed or a home-made comfrey feed, as this foliar feed really boosts the plants.

If you are growing potatoes using the classic row planting method, you will need to 'earth up' as the potatoes grow. This means pulling earth from either side of the rows of potatoes to cover the developing tubers.

In the no-dig system, rather than 'earthing up', simply add more compost or leaf-mould to the bed. This makes the bed deeper and covers the tubers. This is beneficial because if potatoes are exposed to light they will turn green and produce glycoalkaloids. These naturally occurring chemicals – part of the plant's defence system – render the potato useless in the kitchen, as green potatoes can lead to stomach problems.





“IN THE NO-DIG SYSTEM, RATHER THAN ‘EARTHING UP’, SIMPLY ADD MORE COMPOST OR LEAF-MOULD TO THE BED”

WHEN ARE YOUR POTATOES READY TO HARVEST?

When you think that your first early potatoes are ready to harvest, the best thing to do is to get your hands into the bed to see if you can feel the potato tubers. Another way to tell if first earlies are ready is if the plants have flowered – if so, they should be ready to pick.

You really need to eat first earlies at this stage, before they lose their new potato taste, which will happen if they stay in the ground too long. First earlies do not store well.

With second earlies, wait until the foliage starts to turn yellow, then they should be ready for lifting. The best way to lift them is with a fork, and if, like me, you love old tools, the Victorians had potato forks specifically for this task.

Like first earlies, second earlies do not store very well.

Maincrop potatoes are ready when the foliage dies away. You can leave them in the ground for up to two weeks after this. After the potatoes have been harvested, they will need to be dried and can then be stored away over winter – storage needs to be in paper or hessian sacks in a dry, frost-free place for best results.

POTATO-GROWING PROBLEMS

There are five main blights/pests that affect potato crops. It is impossible to cover them all here, but I've prepared a report that deals with these problems; it shows you how to identify them and how best to deal with them. You can get the report for free by heading over to www.learn-how-to-garden.com.

In fact, Mark's website (www.learn-how-to-garden.com) is a mine of useful gardening information and videos.

Alternatively, go to page 47 of last month's Home Farmer to discover some varieties resistant to blackleg, blight, dry rot, eelworm, scab and slugs.





BEDFELLOWS

for the plot

Chemical-free gardening is the aim of most home farmers, so the fact that **some plants** can actually **benefit others** is just **too good to ignore**. **Paul Melnyczuk** investigates

It's often said that there is nothing new under the sun, and much that we now practise is simply a rediscovering of what once was – sometimes improved with the advantage of current technology, but usually that's not the case. It's actually hard to improve on things which have been honed over thousands of years, and companion planting is a perfect example of such a practice. Its history goes back to the rice fields of ancient China and the Americas, the latter responsible for the now familiar 'three sisters' technique, which brings together squash, beans and maize, each benefitting the other and enabling a

small area to become very productive at the same time. The Greeks and Romans were also practitioners many centuries later, but then the knowledge seemed to disappear.

Companion planting was rediscovered in the West in the 1970s, when a reaction to the use of chemicals and the prominence of monocultures brought about a search for a better and non-toxic way of farming effectively. It was also a great advantage for the growing organic sector, which needed to source natural ways of dealing with the problems of pests and diseases, and it really did tick all the boxes. It was a welcome move away from the

sledgehammer peddled by the chemical companies, and, instead, applied a deep knowledge of the individual properties of plants. It was also perfectly compatible with forest gardening, permaculture, square-foot gardening, the organic movement and the biodynamic movement, all growing in popularity with a new generation intent on a return to producing food rather than a commodity.

Today, the value of companion planting in attracting pollinators, discouraging pests, providing shade and creating decoy plants – and a new development suggests that even plastic plants can be effective – is widely

accepted by all except the guardians of monoculture, who probably view the planting of anything other than cash crops as anathema. This short-sighted view will render vast tracts of land unusable in just a matter of decades, if not sooner, as confirmed by recent scientific research which suggests that some regions have now only a couple more harvests left in the depleted soil.

One of the secrets of successful gardening is undoubtedly record keeping, and any gardener worth their salt would have noticed that some plants grew well together, and others actually suffered from being too close. The wise gardener then repeats the successful plantings and discards any less productive ideas, often without any real knowledge of why one worked and the other didn't, but repeat success would certainly have cemented the knowledge, with understanding

coming later as scientific knowledge became available.

The 'three sisters' technique used by Native Americans relied upon a symbiotic relationship between three plants: using beans to fertilise the soil for the hungry sweetcorn, which in turn provided support for the beans, with the leaves of the low-growing squash providing an effective ground cover to both suppress weeds and protect the soil from any extremes of weather. The principles are much the same as in forest gardening, where the use of upward space permits greater productivity per square metre.

In addition to providing support, protection and nutrition, one of the best – and most familiar – properties of plants is their scent, and this can be used in two ways: to either repel insects (known as 'push'), or to attract them (known as 'pull'). Examples of 'push':



COMMONLY GROWN VEG, TOGETHER WITH 'BESTIES' AND FOES

PLANT	BUDDIES	ENEMIES	TIPS
Beets	Lettuce, onions, brassicas, other leaf beets.	Any tall plants.	Leaves are great for composting, but tall plants stunt growth.
Brassicas	Onions, garlic, chives, borage, dill, rosemary, nasturtiums.	Mustards, tomatoes, peppers.	Nasturtiums act as a decoy for aphids, and herbs deter whitefly.
Carrots	Tomatoes, alliums, lettuce, beans.	Parsnips, dill.	Plant with alliums to confuse pests, and with beans to provide nitrogen.
Celery	Leeks, beans, dill.	–	–
Sweetcorn	Beans, peas, potatoes, squashes.	Tomatoes, celery.	A strong physical support for climbing plants.
Leeks	Celery, apple trees.	Legumes.	Treat as alliums.
Lettuce	Beets, climbing beans, carrots, onions.	Celery, cress, parsley.	Strong-smelling herbs can repel slugs and snails.
Alliums (onion family)	Tomatoes, peppers, potatoes, brassicas, carrots.	Peas, asparagus.	Applies to leeks, garlic, shallots and chives, too.
Potatoes	Brassicas, carrots, celery, onions, marigolds, horseradish.	Kohlrabi, squash, turnips, cucumber.	Horseradish helps disease resistance.
Squashes	Sweetcorn, beans, marigolds, nasturtiums.	–	Marigolds and nasturtiums deter pests.
Tomatoes	Asparagus, carrots, onions, garlic, celery.	Sweetcorn, peas, potatoes, beetroot.	Keep tomatoes and potatoes well apart.
Peppers	Basil, onions, tomatoes.	–	Similar requirements to basil.
Radish	Brassicas, beets, climbing beans, turnips, carrots, cucumber, lettuce, peas, spinach, squash.	–	Radish deters pests, including cucumber beetles and spinach leaf miners. A superb companion plant!
Turnips	Catmint, peas, thyme.	–	Needs are those of brassicas.



Above: Striped French marigolds growing among veg on an allotment.

Left: Tomatoes thrive alongside asparagus, basil, beans, carrots, celery, chives, cucumber, garlic, lettuce, onions, parsley, peppers and cucumber, but should be planted away from sweetcorn, peas, potatoes, beetroot, cabbages, kohlrabi and cauliflower.

marigolds, whose odour repels most insects; mint, which repels aphids and cabbage white butterflies; and sweet basil, which repels aphids, mites and mosquitoes. Examples of 'pull': mustard, which attracts most insects; borage, which attracts honeybees; and aster, which attracts both bees and spiders.

Another use for scent is to disguise a specific target plant or to confuse pests in search of their chosen victims by offering a similar scent from a plant which offers zero benefit – strongly scented and pungent chives are an example of a plant which will repel or confuse pests, whereas thyme will actually attract pests *away* from your more valuable veg. In fact, any extra 'decoy' plants placed around the outskirts of veg beds will frustrate pests, which have been shown to give up if they frequently land on plants other than their target destinations. Too many 'wrong plants' can have a striking effect in reducing attacks from both cabbage root flies, carrot root flies and blackfly, with clover as a surrounding plant being particularly successful in reducing infestation by cabbage root flies.

There are, however, also some plants that just don't get on well at all. Garlic, although an effective discouragement to many pests, can impart a garlicky taste on certain plants when in close proximity; and mustard, tomatoes and peppers can have a negative effect on beans and brassicas; and beets grown alongside runner beans or other tall plants will stunt each other. Some plants from the same family are also less than ideal bedfellows,



in the same sense that plant rotation recommends not following each crop with a member of the same family.

As an example, potatoes and tomatoes – both from the same family – suffer from blight, and any plants grown in close proximity will simply increase the likelihood of infestation.

Companion planting is really a no-brainer, especially for anyone planting in small spaces. If used wisely it will increase the biodiversity of your plot and therefore your soil, and will bring about an ecosystem beneficial to your plants' health and welfare. By and large, the science is now well understood, although there are still areas that need

Above: Growing onions, or any alliums, close to your lettuce will deter pests.

further research. Many companion plants are edible kitchen staples, but where they are not useful in the kitchen, they are by and large attractive in the garden. But don't stop with just growing plants alongside each other – explore which plants (such as green manures) grown immediately after a harvest will directly benefit next year's harvest, and look to improve your current harvest by using successional planting to keep the plot active and productive over a longer period, and also consider interplanting between rows of suitable 'buddies' to

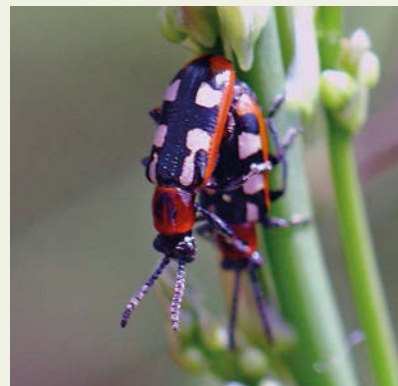
keep down any competition from weeds naturally.

Of course, it's not the answer to all gardening problems – you will still need to get your soil fertile and plant different veg in the most suitable positions – but it will improve your harvests, the quality of your plot and the pleasure of gardening as you learn more about the individual plants you are growing and their likes and dislikes. To help, I have provided a brief list of commonly grown veg, together with 'besties' and foes (see page 34). A complete list would take up an entire magazine, so this is by no means comprehensive.

MORE 'PUSH' AND 'PULL'

In addition to directly benefitting neighbours, certain plants will also deter undesirable insects. For example: basil, marigolds, chervil and garlic will deter aphids if you are growing tomatoes, beans or lettuce; tomatoes and petunia will deter the asparagus beetle (pictured right) if growing asparagus; and rosemary will deter the bean beetle if growing legumes.

For anyone wishing to attract beneficial insects: borage will bring in bees; clover will attract bees, hoverflies and beneficial wasps; tansy attracts ladybirds; sunflowers attract lacewings and beneficial wasps; and the humble nettle – never a disadvantage in small quantities – will attract bees, butterflies, and many other beneficial insects.



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WEEDS

Let's kill 'em!

Weeds can turn gardeners into **vigilantes**, and they do indeed **steal precious nutrients** from our **valuable veg**. Heidi M. Sands investigates some of the **available solutions**

Whether you have weeds springing up between your paving stones, or in the lawn, vegetable patch or flower border, there are effective ways of dealing with them that won't break either the bank or your back.

Most of us will have weeded by hand at one time or another. It's an effective way of getting rid of small weeds that are otherwise inaccessible by other methods, but it's also a time-consuming activity and unsuitable for larger areas. There are various hand tools available for the job, from trowels to forks, with more coming onto the market all the time. The important thing to remember when hand-weeding is to ensure that *all* roots are severed from *beneath* the soil. In dry conditions the weeds can then be left on the surface to dry out. Raking them away for disposal is also an option, and, in wet conditions, this is advisable to prevent any regrowth. The raked-up weeds can then be added to the compost heap or burned, if dry. Some weeds will harbour seeds, but a properly kept compost heap should heat up and kill most of these.

Deep-rooted weeds such as dandelions, with their strong taproots, need to be weeded out as individual weeds. The best way to do this is to dig down with a fork or spade slightly deeper than the length of the root and remove it in its entirety. If you leave any portion of the root behind it may regrow. Other individual weeds can also be removed this way.

Below: For smaller beds, hand-weeding tools are usually more than adequate.

Right: A fork is ideal for removing any bigger taprooted weeds.





A small hoe is suitable for use around bedding plants, in the herb garden and in borders.

Quote!

"A weed is a plant that has mastered every survival skill except for learning how to grow in rows."
Doug Larson

Bigger areas of small- to medium-sized weeds are generally easy to hoe out. This is an effective way to tackle such areas; it is best done in dry conditions, and for effective weed killing the blade of the hoe should go under the soil, loosening any roots. Hoeing is one of the best ways to keep weeds down between rows of vegetables and in the polytunnel: the hoe is easy to control and keep away from the delicate roots of growing crops. A hoe is also suitable for use around bedding plants, in the herb garden and in borders.

Weeds in the fruit garden can be particularly difficult to deal with. One of the most effective ways of overcoming weeds growing under fruit bushes and soft fruit is by mulching. Mulching keeps light from reaching the weeds, preventing their growth, whilst potentially retaining water for the growing fruit plants. Any mulch can be used, with lawn clippings, thick cardboard, carpet offcuts and black plastic sheeting all being useful. Ensure that any mulch covers and traps the weeds beneath it in order to be effective. Topping up grass clippings or any other organic mulch as it rots down is advisable in order to retain its effectiveness.

If you are still on the lookout for a non-chemical way of disposing of weeds, one of the more unusual is to burn them out. Looking a bit like something out of a science fiction film, weed burners are available from garden centres, DIY shops and agricultural merchants. They are powered by gas canisters, so are unsuitable for use by children. The idea behind them is to literally burn the weeds out, so the burner needs to

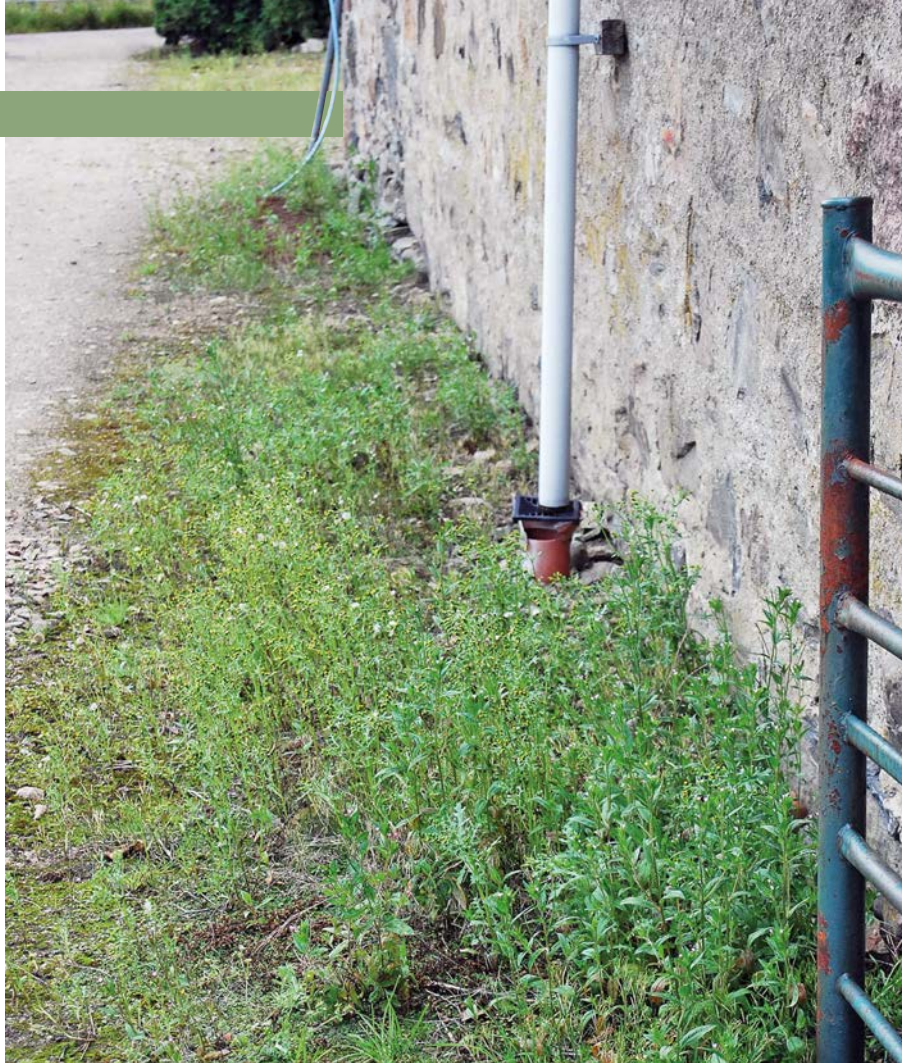
"...FOR EFFECTIVE WEED KILLING THE BLADE OF THE HOE SHOULD GO UNDER THE SOIL, LOOSENING ANY ROOTS"

be kept on the weeds for long enough, and it may take some trial and error to get it just right. The problem with the burner is that it can also burn other things; passing it too close to the plastic of a polytunnel will have predictable results, so it may not be suitable for use everywhere in the growing environment. It may be useful for getting rid of weeds between paving stones though, where any residual heat will be less harmful. The cost and disposal of gas canisters needs to be borne in mind if considering this approach, particularly if you are thinking of doing anything other than small areas.

You could, of course, always leave the weeds and learn to live with them. If you have areas of ground that don't matter in your growing plans this may be one way of approaching a weed problem. Leaving an area fallow for weeds to deliberately grow is used in some parts of the world as a legitimate part of growing practice. The weedy area is turned over in rotation, whilst another area is then left fallow in turn. And don't forget that some weeds are indeed beneficial, adding nutrients to the soil once they are incorporated into the tilth, or being either nutritious or medicinal.

A mechanical approach to weed management is to mow or trim weedy areas in grassland, around trees and alongside driveways or paths. This has the benefit of keeping things neat and green. It needs to be done on a regular basis, but it does have an advantage in that grass will usually take over from the weeds, and although it's not a generally accepted way of weeding, it really is quite effective. The resulting grass or clippings from mowing in this way can be composted or used as a mulch elsewhere in the garden, killing two birds with one stone.

So far we've looked at non-chemical ways of dealing with weeds, but the most usual way to get rid of weeds in all kinds of situations is to use weedkiller. There are various types of weedkiller on



Although unwanted, these weeds alongside the drive are not a priority.

sale; some are for use on certain weeds only and are usually known as selective weedkillers, and others will kill almost any green growing thing. Selective weedkillers have the advantage that they can be used to take out weeds without harming other growing plants or grass.

Most weedkillers are liquid and come either pre-mixed ready for application or need to be added to water at a specified rate. All weedkillers need to be treated with respect; they are after all poisonous, and it cannot be stressed enough that all labels should be read carefully and children and pets kept

away from all packaging, the weedkiller itself, any applicators and – at least for a time – any treated areas. People using weedkillers should do so cautiously and wear protective clothing and adhere to any safety rules on the packaging. Most weedkillers are either sprayed onto the weeds or applied with a watering can reserved for the purpose, but some are spot-on weedkillers and are applied directly to the growing weed.

However you might approach the age-old problem of weeds, remember that they are just 'plants growing in the wrong place'!



Left: A thistle is only appealing in the garden if your name is Eeyore.



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GARLIC

A force for good

Ruth Tott considers **garlic** – a plant with renowned **health-giving** qualities and a great **allium ally** in the struggle to **keep pests off** our veg

Perhaps the most beneficial and natural way of using garlic in the garden is as a companion plant (see page 33 of this month's magazine for lots more of that), but a close second is to create a garlic tea, which can then be applied directly onto a plant using a spray bottle to put off would-be pests, either by killing them outright – remember how your grandparents reacted to garlic bread as recently as the 1960s – or confusing them sufficiently to render them incapable of causing damage. Garlic contains sulphur, a natural fungicide, so gets Brownie points for treating powdery mildew, too.

GARLIC SPRAY

YOU WILL NEED

- * 5 medium-sized garlic bulbs, skinned and crushed
- * Spray bottle
- * Standard jam jar filled with water
- * Muslin (to filter the garlicky mixture)

METHOD

- 1 Mince the garlic, then soak in water for a minimum of 6 hours, and a maximum of 18 hours.
- 2 Strain through muslin to remove the bits of garlic, or blitz in a liquidiser,

bits and all, to create a creamy looking sort of garlic soup.

- 3 Dilute with water at a ratio of 1 part garlic solution to 2 parts water, then put it in your spray bottle.

THE VERDICT

Pests such as slugs, aphids and ants really don't like it up 'em, but sadly, nor do the good guys – garlic spray has many good points, but it does require a note of caution. Only use this horticultural WMD on already infested plants, rather than splashing it about liberally. Also, don't use it too close to harvest, as it can impart a garlicky taste, especially on delicately flavoured veg. If it rains soon after application outdoors, give the plant a further dose.

Overall, garlic makes an excellent, economical and non-toxic pesticide with natural fungicidal and pesticidal properties – great news if you avoid artificial chemical pest control – and you can also use garlic tea as a drench directly onto your soil, where it is then absorbed by the plants' roots; it's highly recommended as a means of controlling carrot fly. However,

remember – it will also deter beneficial insects.

Garlic is great for intercropping with, or growing alongside, tomatoes; red spider mite aren't overly thrilled about the odour, and it's recommended for keeping both your veg and roses aphid free, too. It's the smell that does it: confusing pests by concealing the smell of their target plant, while repelling others, so intercrop to your heart's content. The bonus of a garlic harvest means it's really a no-brainer.

Finally, adding finely chopped garlic to your poultry's food and water acts as a wholesome and natural worm deterrent, while cleaning out the system: it's a natural disinfectant and benefits both the liver and gall bladder.

GROWING YOUR OWN

Plant garlic in autumn for a bountiful harvest, but if you want to intercrop with it, then planting some in spring is fine, too. You could even plant cloves from a shop-bought bulb, which is often successful, although the 'experts' recommend you use bulbs from certified suppliers or seed merchants.

METHOD

- 1 Break the bulbs into individual cloves, taking care not to damage the cloves, as this encourages premature rotting.
- 2 In milder regions, plant cloves directly into well-prepared soil, spacing them 10cm apart. Push the cloves into the soil so that the narrow, tapered tip is just below the surface.
- 3 In colder regions, harden off in pots on the windowsill before planting into beds.
- 4 When planting outside, cover with horticultural fleece until all risk of frost has passed.
- 5 Do not let bulbs dry out!





Top Tip!

Garlic contains sulphur, and sulphur is a natural fungicide, so it's great for treating powdery mildew, too.

“...GARLIC MAKES AN EXCELLENT, ECONOMICAL AND NON-TOXIC PESTICIDE WITH NATURAL FUNGICIDAL AND PESTICIDAL PROPERTIES”

FORAGING

Spring has sprung!

Longer daylight makes a real **difference** for the keen **forager**, and **David Winnard** finds many special **treats** reappearing in the **hedgerows, woods** and **lanes**

Once again, my foraging Home Farmer faithful, we are coming out of the darkness and into the light. Winter is now behind us, leaves are growing, and even some flowers are out – spring has finally sprung, and we need to be prepared to take advantage of nature's bounty this coming month. It always amazes me that as soon as we get to this time of year, the wealth of species we can use just seems to grow and grow (no pun intended here), and the real advantage of foraging at this time of year is that most of these species grow commonly right across the UK, so everyone will be able to find them.

One thing did trouble me this month that I want to share with you, though, and again it underlines how disconnected with nature the residents of modern

Britain perhaps are. I heard on the news that supermarkets were to stop putting daffodils near to the fruit and veg, as people were eating them and becoming ill. Things must be even worse than I had thought; surely, if you put bottles of bleach next to the fruit and veg, people would not automatically assume you could drink it! Education is perhaps what is lacking, as many kids these days cannot even tell you where basics such as milk come from, or what a leek is, let alone what the different common British wild flowers actually look like, or whether or not they might be edible. It does worry me that the understanding many kids have about nature is so poor that the next generation might simply not care about looking after our remaining green spaces. Education has to be the key – don't hide things away

or move them, just educate people about them and show them just how amazing they all are, and then they will remember it and pass it down to their own kids.

But perhaps I just worry too much. Perhaps I should look at it from a different angle – there's more wild food for the rest of us! It certainly feels that way when I am out picking all the lovely wild edibles. Plus, if everyone was doing it, I would be struggling when it came to birthdays and Christmas, as my foraged hampers would not be quite as unique!

And speaking of gifts, I have been treating myself to some new gadgets that will hopefully add new flavours or ways to preserve what I find, so next month we will be talking foraging gadgets – the ones you really do need, and the ones you really can live without.

A FEW OLD FRIENDS

We have discussed some of the following before, but here is just a brief reminder of a few of the species that you should be finding and using this month:

* WILD GARLIC

The leaves (right) will be out in force and make a great spring green and an even better pesto. The flowers will emerge late in the month and through May, and they make a wonderful garnish and pack a real punch of flavour.



weeds and they're full of goodness, and now is the time to make nettle soup and the scrummy nettle gnocchi. Use the leaves *before* they flower, and if you keep picking



them you will get fresh leaves right throughout the summer, too.

* NETTLES

These are everyone's favourite

* PIGNUTS

The small leaves of pignuts are



Bounty!

With the arrival of spring, the leaves begin to grow, and even some flowers are out, so you need to take advantage of nature's bounty.

“DANISH SCURVYGRASS IS A COASTAL SPECIES AND PREFERS THE SALTY CONDITIONS BY THE SEA, BUT WHEN WE STARTED GRITTING OUR ROADS WITH SALT, THE ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH THIS SPECIES COULD THRIVE INCREASED DRAMATICALLY”

easiest to see now, so you can find sites for them and get your hands on some nuts. Remember to ask the landowner if you can uproot the plants, though, or better still, grow some in a small part of your garden or allotment – it's also much easier to dig them up!

*** BISTORT**

Depending where you are in the country it can be tricky to find, but here in the Pennines it is very common (pictured left). The leaves can be used like spinach and have a wonderful flavour, and getting a couple of bagfuls should take seconds and not make a dint on the overall amount!



Danish scurvygrass (Cochlearia danica).



Danish scurvygrass (*Cochlearia danica*).

So, whilst members of the great British public seem incapable of walking into a supermarket without poisoning themselves by grazing on flower bouquets, we shall be looking at the particular wild stuff we can eat this month, and after a brief recap of some of the species you can find now (see A FEW OLD FRIENDS), I have four special suggestions for you to look out for and hopefully use.

These plants will tantalise the taste buds, but please remember: if you do not *know for absolute certain what it is* and you are *not 100% confident*, then *do not pick it*, and definitely *do not eat it!*

DANISH SCURVYGRASS

(*Cochlearia danica*)

What a delightful little plant this is; it's certainly one I always look forward to seeing in the spring. It is a rather small and modest plant (I do like that in wild flowers), but it does form dense carpets along the side of roads, which can become rather impressive. I was shown this species by my grandma when I was small. It was growing by the side of a road in Rochdale, and at the time (the mid 1990s) it was the only patch of it in the local area, but now it is one of the most recorded spring plants I see. So, what has brought about this dramatic increase? The simple answer is salt. Danish scurvygrass is a coastal species and prefers the salty conditions by the sea, but when we started gritting our roads with salt, the environment in which this species could thrive increased dramatically. Now it literally carpets motorways, dual carriageways and roads where gritting occurs, and you cannot travel anywhere on main roads in spring without seeing it.

So, what else does this species have other than an ability to adapt

and thrive? Well, as its name suggests, it was once used to help prevent scurvy in sailors, as it contains a high amount of vitamin C and is also able to tolerate the salty conditions at sea. The leaves are shaped like a small spoon, and the flowers are small and white, but with a lilac cast. The taste of the leaves is lovely but can be a bit fiery, with notes of both horseradish and cress. It is great added to salads, or even in a pesto. Whilst you would not really want to pick this plant from the side of a very busy road, it does occur frequently around small country lanes, and finding a patch from a place where it is not going to be dirty from pollution should prove relatively easy. There are actually three species of scurvygrass in the UK, and they all taste the same.

GREATER PLANTAIN

(*Plantago major*)

Before you say it, yes, this is a species you get growing in your lawn or on your drive, and it can indeed be quite a weed, but as we know all too well, this just means it is easy to get, and it's a tasty treat for the forager. There are a number

Greater plantain (*Plantago major*).



Left: Cowslip (*Primula veris*).
Right: Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*).
Below: Oxlip (*Primula elatior*).



PRIMROSE

(*Primula vulgaris*)

Let's make it clear that we are talking about *Primula vulgaris*, a native plant of woods, hedges and even sand-dunes (pictured left), *and not* the primroses you get in garden centres for the garden, such as *Primula obconica*, which is actually poisonous. This pretty little flower is often used to decorate cakes, usually in candied form, but the leaves are edible, too, and they can be added to spring salads and have a rather distinctive honey flavour.

COWSLIP

(*Primula veris*)

I have included this one, as the uses are very similar to those of the primrose. It is a member of the same family and occurs at roughly the same time of year, so you are likely to encounter both. The cowslip is a taller plant than the primrose, and the flowers are smaller but on longer stalks. It is slightly more fussy about where it grows, preferring more alkaline habitats, especially chalk grassland, but it is also seen in woods, hedges and meadows. The leaves and flowers can both be eaten.

There is also the similar but rather rarer oxlip (*Primula elatior*), which is also edible. It has paler flowers and leaves, and the flowers all face the same way.

So, there we go, foragers.

Happy hunting for another month!

NEXT MONTH

We shall be looking at some seasonal species to find, and considering gadgets for foraging – what you need, and what you don't. In the meantime, keep safe and keep looking out for everything leafy and fungal!

SLUGS & SNAILS

Get on their trails

Elizabeth McCorquodale checks out some **commonly used methods** to keep **slugs and snails off** your valuable **veg**

Each month in this Facts and Fables column I will be taking a close look at some common 'truths' – garden lore that has been handed down for years and which most of us now accept as fact. I would also love to investigate your own pieces of garden wisdom to see if they really *do* hold up under scrutiny, so please send your ideas to ruth@homefarmer.co.uk and I will put them to the test over the coming months.

I have decided to start off with something dear to my own heart – ways to keep slugs and snails away from my plants – so I am taking a look at various 'slug barriers': eggshells, copper, ashes and other materials that I have found around my house and garden and which have a reputation for deterring both slugs and snails.

THE THEORY

It seems like common sense that soft-bodied molluscs (slugs and snails are actually gastropods, the only type of land-based mollusc – *gastro* means 'stomach' and *pod* means 'foot') would be harmed by sharp, prickly or uncomfortable surfaces, and we should be able to use this weakness to protect our vulnerable plants.

THE TEST

To test the theory I collected ten, round wooden boards, a selection of barrier materials, and several species of snail and slug. I spread a 5cm-wide strip of the chosen barrier material on the rim of each board, then surrounded them with a tempting ring of salad leaves. On the premise that conditions in the garden would be wet for a good part of the time, I also wet one half of the barrier material on each board with rainwater and left the other half dry. When all the boards were ready I placed seven different types of slug and snail in the centre of each board and sat back to watch the show.

As each barrier was breached I

transferred the escapees to another board, one of which appeared to be presenting some difficulties, until all the slugs and snails (all, that is, bar Harry – more on him later) were corralled within one virtually impenetrable barrier.

The deterrents I trialled were copper wire, hair, sharp sand, finely ground oatmeal, eggshells, sawdust, Vaseline, steel wool, sandpaper and wood ash. The species used were the common garden slug, the grey field slug, the grey slug, the garden snail, the white-lipped snail and the strawberry snail.

“THE SHARP SAND, HAIR AND SAWDUST ONLY MADE THEM HESITATE...”

THE TRUTH

The sandpaper and the Vaseline were like invitations to dinner – neither had *any* deterrent effect whatsoever. The crew didn't even pause; they just galloped straight across and started munching.

The sharp sand, hair and sawdust only made them hesitate, but not stop, and it took less than ten minutes for all to make their escape from these three test boards. The fine oats took a while longer, but only because they all stopped to feast first before making their exit!

Steel wool slowed down the majority of our motley crew considerably, and stopped three of them in their tracks. I must admit, though, that I would hesitate to use steel wool in my borders for fear of spearing my fingers on shards of rusty metal. Perhaps it would best be used as a pad under patio pots?

Copper is supposed to deliver enough of a shock to stop slugs and snails crossing over, and while their little tentacles did retract when they touched it, the shock just wasn't enough to stop them. After several hours, every one of the group had crossed the copper.

As this was a trial of 'found' materials, I used a wide strip of copper wires that I salvaged from the innards of an electrical cable, but I have, in the past, also trialled copper pipe and found that to be no more effective.

Roughly crushed eggshells didn't work either, but finely crushed shells were a different story. Every one, bar Harry, took a very, very long time to risk the traverse, and after a whole night of thinking, half the slugs and snails had slithered gingerly across, but the other half had stayed put.

That left us with just the wood ash, and after a whole night on the last remaining board, only Harry had crossed the ash barrier. Two snails had tried but failed – they were covered in a green slime and not very happy – and the rest were huddled in a sad group, still in the centre of the board.

So, in this battle against slugs and snails, in magnificent first place stands wood ash, with finely crushed eggshells a little way behind in second place! That some of the others didn't make the grade was a real surprise to me, but it does go to show that sometimes we do need to really put things to the test.

Slime provides some degree of protection to all slugs and snails, and because it is hygroscopic – it absorbs water – it is always more efficient in wet conditions. It is this slime, I believe, that must have been the saviour of 'Harry Houdini' (the super-escape-slug), who managed to cross every single barrier with no ill effects. So, remember, when you are surrounding your seedlings and your hostas with wood ash and eggshells – there will *always* be a Harry lurking somewhere in the undergrowth.



Fact!

Slugs and snails are
gastropods (the only type
of land-based mollusc) –
gastro means 'stomach'
and pod means 'foot'.

*Snails on the ash board
looking for a crossing point.*



WONDERWOOL

celebrates a decade!

Wonderwool Wales celebrates its **10th anniversary** with an event that promises to be **bigger, better** and even more **exciting**. Here are just some of the treats to expect, together with a special **Wonderwool** pattern for Home Farmer readers

Fascinating for fibre fans, fabulous for feltmakers, captivating for craft lovers and marvellous for makers, the annual wool and natural fibre extravaganza that is Wonderwool Wales returns for its tenth anniversary year in April. It's an opportunity to join together with fibre fans from across the UK, and even some from abroad, at the Royal Welsh Showground in Builth Wells over the weekend of 25th and 26th April. Enjoy special exhibitions, daily demonstrations and have-a-go sessions on many of the exhibitor stands, as well as the popular programme of Woolschools put together by the organisers, the regular demonstrations by members

of the Welsh Guild of Weavers, Spinners and Dyers, the hands-on activities in the interactive area, and a series of felting demonstrations by the International Feltmakers Association.

Thanks to the wealth of quality exhibitors present, craftspeople and makers can shop 'til they drop at stalls selling fleeces, yarns, spinning and weaving equipment, knitting and crochet products, buttons, buckles and shawl pins, patterns and more. Shoppers will also be able to buy from stalls selling beautiful

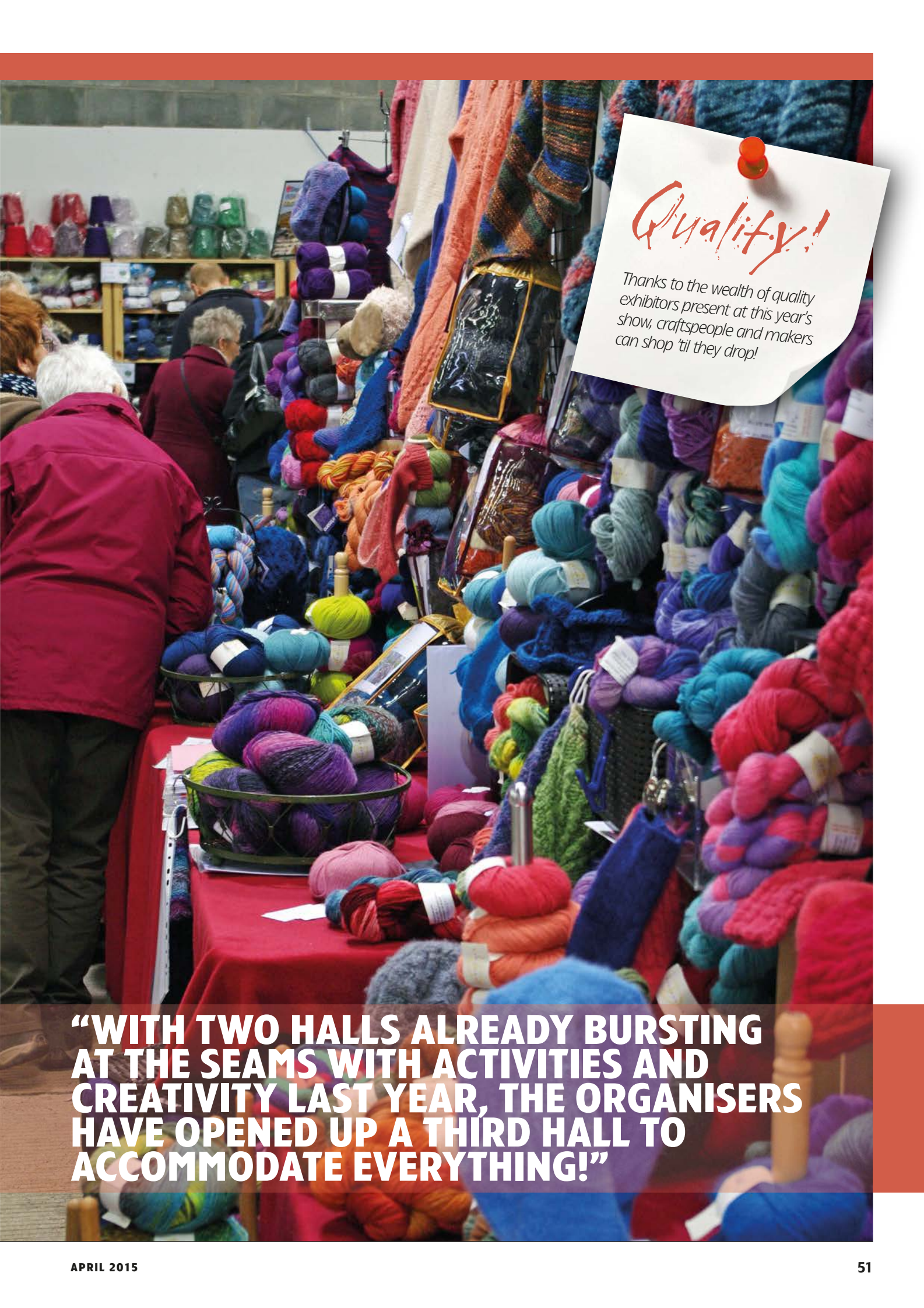
ready-made handcrafted items, recycled and upcycled clothing, tempting textile art, needle-felted animals, felted stoles, bags and jewellery, rag rugs, designer knitwear and vintage textiles and treasures. Livestock exhibitors will also be there with some of their alpacas and sheep.

The popular programme of pre-bookable Woolschools, always a highlight of the show, will include drop spindle spinning, free-form knitting, making needle-felted animals with Jenny Barnett, learning the traditional technique to make Dorset Buttons, and creating 3D felt flowers with Mandy Nash.

With two halls already bursting at the seams with activities and creativity last year, the organisers have opened up a third hall to accommodate

Fibre fans can expect plenty of retail therapy at Wonderwool Wales, where there will be three halls crammed with stalls.





Quality!

Thanks to the wealth of quality exhibitors present at this year's show, craftspeople and makers can shop 'til they drop!

“WITH TWO HALLS ALREADY BURSTING AT THE SEAMS WITH ACTIVITIES AND CREATIVITY LAST YEAR, THE ORGANISERS HAVE OPENED UP A THIRD HALL TO ACCOMMODATE EVERYTHING!”

everything! Located in Hall 3 will be some of 2015's 'big' attractions, including Alison Murray, who brought her Giant Textile Books to last year's show and will be visiting the show this year, too, with her giant knitted Gingerbread House. The ever-popular Sheepwalk, a woolly take on the catwalk, will be back again this year, also located in Hall 3. The quirky fashion show gives exhibitors the chance to show off their creations, and, if previous years are a guide, it is guaranteed to be very entertaining.

Back in Hall 2, another massive visitor draw is the Cardigan for Cardigan, a giant, five-metre-wide garment knitted by 300 townsfolk and visitors to celebrate the town's 900th birthday.

If all this has got you itching to get out your knitting needles, the Wonderwool Wales organisers have come up with a special pattern for Home Farmer readers – a Cable Patterned Hat in double knitting yarn. The instructions are in three sizes – for a child, woman and man. Where the instructions differ, the child's size is given first, and the woman's and man's follow in brackets.

CABLE PATTERNED HAT

MATERIALS

100g double knitting yarn

EQUIPMENT

1 pair each 3.25mm and 4mm straight knitting needles, and 1 cable needle

ABBREVIATIONS

k – knit

p – purl

st(s) – stitch(es)

CN – cable needle

C4B – cable 4 back – slip next 2 sts onto CN and hold at back of work; k next 2 sts, then k2 from CN

Above: See the massive Cardigan for Cardigan at Wonderwool Wales 2015.

Top: Learning how to make needle-felted chickens with Jenny Barnett at the 2014 show. Jenny returns this year to give a Woolschool showing how to make needle-felted animals. Photo © John Teale.

C4F – cable 4 front – slip next 2 sts onto CN and hold at front of work; k next 2 sts, then k2 from CN

Tw3B – twist 3 back – slip next st onto CN and hold at back of work; k next 2 sts, then p1 from CN

Tw3F – twist 3 front – slip next 2 sts onto CN and hold at front of work; p next st, then k2 from CN

TENSION TIP!

This will vary slightly according to the type of DK yarn you use, but the stretchy nature of the rib should ensure the hat fits. If in doubt, knit a sample of the pattern over 30 sts, then check the measurements and decide if you need to knit a different size or adjust the pattern.

PATTERN

With 3.25mm needles cast on 112 (120) (128) sts.

Work in k1, p1 rib as follows: slip 1st st, *k1, p1, repeat from * to last but 1 st, k1.

Repeat this row until work measures, 13 (16) (19) cm, ending with a right-side row.





FURTHER INFO

Wonderwool Wales takes place on 25th and 26th April 2015 at the Royal Welsh Showground, Builth Wells, Powys, LD2 3SY. The opening hours are: Saturday 10am–5.30pm; Sunday 10am–4.30pm. Tickets cost £9.00 for adults, and children under 16 gain entry for free. Online booking is available – postage costs apply.

For a chance to win tickets to Wonderwool Wales 2015, go to page 9.

For more details, visit www.wonderwoolwales.co.uk, or email enquiries@wonderwoolwales.co.uk, or telephone 01938 820495/07980 913972/01873 821205.



“THE ANNUAL WOOL AND NATURAL FIBRE EXTRAVAGANZA THAT IS WONDERWOOL WALES RETURNS FOR ITS TENTH ANNIVERSARY YEAR IN APRIL”

Increasing row: rib 7 (7) (8) sts, * work twice into next st, rib 13 (14) (15) sts, rep from * until 7 (8) (8) sts remain, work twice into next st, rib to end of row. (120 (128) (136) sts.)

Change to 4mm needles and work pattern as follows:

Row 1 (right side): * p2 (3) (4), k4, p4, C4B, p2, C4B, p4, p2 (3) (4); repeat from * to end of row.

Row 2 (wrong side): * k2 (3) (4), p4, k4, p4, k2, p4, k4, p4, k2 (3) (4); repeat from * to end of row.

Row 3: * p2 (3) (4), C4B, p3, (Tw3B, Tw3F) twice, p3, C4F, p2 (3) (4); repeat from * to end of row.

Row 4: * k2 (3) (4), p4, k3, p2, k2, p4, k2, p2, k3, p4, k2 (3) (4); repeat from * to end of row.

Row 5: * p2 (3) (4), k4, p3, k2, p2, C4F, p2, k2, p3, k4, p2 (3) (4); repeat from * to end of row.

Row 6: * k2 (3) (4), p4, k3, p2, k2, p4, k2, p2, k3, p4, k2 (3) (4); repeat from * to end of row.

Row 7: * k2 (3) (4), C4B, p3, (Tw3F, Tw3B) twice, p3, C4F, p2 (3) (4); repeat from * to end of row.

Row 8: * k2 (3) (4), p4, k4, p4, k2, p4, k4, p4, k2 (3) (4); repeat from * to end of row.

These 8 rows form the pattern. Repeat them until work measures approximately 28 (32) (31) cm from the cast on edge, ending on the 4th

(8th) (4th) pattern row. (The hat may be made longer or shorter here simply by repeating the pattern more or fewer times.)

Next row: k2 together across all sts. (60 (64) (68) sts.)

Next row: p2 together across all sts. (30 (32) (34) sts.)

Next row: k2 together across all sts. (15 (16) (17) sts.)

Break off yarn, thread through remaining sts, draw up tightly and fasten off securely.

TO MAKE UP

Follow the ball band instructions about blocking or pressing the work. Using a flat stitch or a back stitch, join the patterned section of the hat with right sides together, taking care to match the row ends. Join the ribbed section with an over and over stitch, remembering to reverse the seam along the bottom half of the rib where it will be turned back. The hats may be finished off with a pompom or tassel if desired.

Far left to right:

1. The finished man's hat.
2. The finished man's hat knitted up in Navia Faroese.
3. The child's hat in Rowan baby merino silk.
4. The woman's hat knitted up in Rowan felted tweed.
5. A close-up of a sample of the pattern.



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A WAY OF LIFE

A Smallholder's Diary

Dot Tyne's diary entries for **January** include some **rough weather**, scanning the **pregnant ewes**, **TB tests** that give the cattle the **all-clear**, and the house finally gets the **go-ahead** for **solar panels**

1ST JANUARY

Very wet and windy, so not a great start to the year. Nearly got blown away while checking the sheep.

Had an unexpected visit from a good friend, so the day degenerated into a lazy evening.

Roast beef with all the trimmings for dinner, followed by banana ice cream made by the girls, which they served in chocolate bowls.

2ND JANUARY

Back to normal today after the festive season.

Tim went out to get some Hesston bales of straw and also to stock up on feed.

The wind has dropped since yesterday, so I was able to spread some black plastic over one of the empty vegetable plots. Weighted it down with plenty of old tyres.

Finished the last of the Christmas dinner roast, cooked up as curry.

3RD JANUARY

Iestyn and Rhian went beating for the shoot today.

Checked the sheep on the mountain. Saw a young ewe that had shed almost all her wool. Rather worrying, as there are all kinds of nasty things that can have that effect, but despite the fact that she is bald she seems very well and doesn't appear to be in any distress or scratching or anything like that, so there's no immediate cause for concern. We'll get a proper look at her when we gather the ewes for scanning in a week or so.



Tim clipped the feet of all the ram lambs – they've been in for a while now, so their feet needed a bit of attention.

Iestyn and Rhian brought some pheasants home with them, so had pheasant and celeriac casserole for dinner, then made bread and flapjacks.

4TH JANUARY

Spent an afternoon gathering, cutting, splitting and stacking firewood. There should be enough for about three weeks.

We had one of our favourites for dinner – bacon, leek and egg pie, followed by Llinos' blancmange.

Baked a batch of curranty cakes and also chocolate and cranberry cookies.

5TH JANUARY

Spotted the bald sheep again on my way around the mountain – she does look healthy enough!

Mostly doing paperwork, as the weather has been rotten today.

Buttercup is being very awkward about going back into the cowshed after milking. This probably dates back to an incident when she slipped going through the door – cows have a good memory for that sort of thing. Tried giving her just half her grub while being milked and then used the rest to tempt her back into the shed. It worked a treat – hopefully, that will make things easier for Iestyn and me while Tim is away later in the week.

Herby pork bake for dinner, and then made bread.

6TH JANUARY

Tidying up in Tim's workshop – he is going down to see his mum and help her sort out her workshop stuff, and he will probably bring quite a few things back here, so needed to make some space in advance. It would make a change to be able to get in the door!

7TH JANUARY

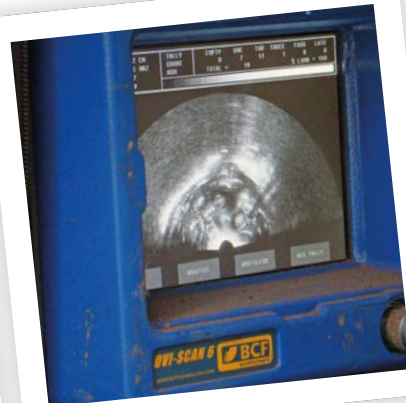
Another really nasty day – got soaked checking the sheep.

Tim headed off to his mum's mid morning. It always seems very quiet when he's not here.

Made quiche for dinner and also baked cookies and bara brith.

8TH JANUARY

Received our first booking for the 2015 lambing course today. We need to finish off the brochure and send it out to everyone who's enquired, and also update the website. We need to organise



local smallholdings to visit during the course, too, as the places we have been to in the past aren't available to us this year. We may need to go a little bit further to find somewhere suitable.

9TH JANUARY

One of the tup lambs is poorly. Found him stuck under the hayrack this morning – thought he just had pins and needles to start with, but he didn't improve. Separated him from the group and treated him with a broad-spectrum antibiotic and multivitamin both am and pm. He's not eating, but is drinking, which is something to be grateful for.

Very windy overnight, and a couple of *huge* cypress trees came down. Amazingly they didn't land on either the road or our drive, but fell neatly between the two!

10TH JANUARY

Took Llinos and Rhian to work this morning and checked the sheep.

Tim got home late morning, having left his mother's about 4am.

Spent most of the afternoon unloading and putting away the things he brought back with him. The haul includes a partly completed sailing dinghy that his sister started building when she lived here with us for a year after finishing her A levels. Will have to hang it from the shed roof – there's nowhere else to put it!

11TH JANUARY

Collected all the sheep hurdles and popped them in the trailer. Went to gather the ewes off the mountain ready for scanning at the beginning of the week. They came down fairly easily and most of the ewes are looking pretty well. The wethers that have been on the mountain (for mutton) are looking rather ropey, so we gave them all a dose for liver fluke before letting them go again. Had a close look at the bald sheep. Her skin looks

healthy enough, so it's unlikely to be any sort of external parasite. She has some partially healed wounds on her flank, though, so it seems likely that she has been attacked by a dog and the stress has made all her wool drop out. Hopefully, she won't have lost her lambs as well! Brought them home in four trailer-loads and put them on the rough patch behind the yard. Took the later-lambing group (which has been at home since the rams came out) up to the mountain to join the wethers. Pregnancy scanning booked for the day after tomorrow.

12TH JANUARY

Tim gathered up another late-lambing group from some rented grazing and took them to the mountain, as we'll need their field for the ewes that scan with twins.

Went out this afternoon to a Farming Connect information afternoon about EID and performance recording. I think Tim probably knew most of it already, but it's always useful to go to these gatherings, as you can pick up lots of tips and hints.

Made bread this evening – it was very slow to rise, as it was pretty cold in the kitchen.

13TH JANUARY

It was a busy day.

Made space in the shed to allow us to get all the ewes in and sort them out.

Emptied a yard by temporarily combining two groups of ram lambs.

The scanner arrived bang on time (as always!) at 1pm. We're fairly pleased with the results – it works out at 137%, which is OK for mountain ewes. Having too many twins would be a nuisance for us.

Had to go out this evening, so we'll sort and dose the ewes tomorrow. Picked through the remaining store lambs and selected half a dozen to go to market in the morning.

14TH JANUARY

Took the lambs to the mart – they weighed in at an average of 43kg and sold for £75, which works out at £1.74/kg. Weather turned nasty, so we decided to leave sorting the ewes until tomorrow in the hope that the weather might be better.

15TH JANUARY

Gathered the ewes in. Ran them all through the weigh crate, dosed them all for fluke and then sorted them into groups according to the number of lambs they are carrying. Used the new EID reader to record the weights and lamb numbers for them all. I'm sure that the electronic recording will be very useful, but I think it's going to take a while for us to get the hang of it. Took the twins to their grazing and the singles to another piece of rough ground on the mountain. Decided to keep the bald sheep in the shed until her wool grows back.

Rang the abattoir and booked one of the pigs in for killing next week. This one is destined for sausages.

16TH JANUARY

The ram lamb that I found stuck under the hayrack last week died today, despite treatment and careful nursing.

18TH JANUARY

Spent some time wandering in the garden this afternoon. Checked over the fruit bushes and trees to see what needs pruning or treating. Several of the apple trees have canker, but most of the affected areas are too high up for me to reach them, so there is a limit to what I can do about it. Ideally, they should be sprayed, but I'd rather avoid that and keep it under control by pruning if I can.

Adjusted some of the black plastic on the vegetable plots after all the wind last week.



**“WENT TO GATHER THE
EWES OFF THE MOUNTAIN
READY FOR SCANNING
AT THE BEGINNING
OF THE WEEK”**

Top Tip!

Cutting the horns off a ram using a wire saw is relatively simple, and a better option if the horns threaten to grow into its head.



19TH JANUARY

Tim spent the morning talking to two different solar panel reps – time to have another crack at getting this sorted out after our aborted effort last year. There was nothing much to choose between the two packages on offer. It will all depend on which of them can get the house to pass the EPC inspection.

Trimmed the horns on a couple of the stock rams, where they have grown too close to their faces. Also gave them all a dose for liver fluke.

Made bread, but it's still very slow to rise.

20TH JANUARY

Checked sheep this morning.

Made a start on pruning the gooseberry bushes. They didn't get done last year, so I have been quite harsh with the secateurs.

A nice dry day, so Tim did some more muck-spreading this afternoon, finishing the field in front of the house and doing most of the field by the shed.

Lamb chops for dinner, then made muffins and cookies.

21ST JANUARY

Loaded up the pig and took it to the abattoir. Such a pity we don't have one nearer to home.

Carried on with muck-spreading.

Pruned a few more gooseberry bushes.

22ND JANUARY

A bit of a frost this morning.

Checked the sheep and found one of the wethers dead in a ditch.

Spent some time digging one of the vegetable plots – I like to do this when the ground is just a bit crispy! I was really pleased to see how many earthworms there are. Hopefully, this means that the soil is in pretty good nick.



23RD JANUARY

Spent most of the day in the garden digging and pruning.

24TH JANUARY

Tim started tidying up the area at the front of the extension where scrap timber and rubble was dumped during the building process. There should be some wood that is reusable, but quite a bit of it will be split up for kindling.

More work in amongst the fruit bushes – finished pruning the gooseberries and redcurrants. The latter had become rather unruly after not being cut back last year, so I have pruned them back pretty hard. I don't know what that will mean in terms of potential fruit yields; time will tell!

25TH JANUARY

Spent the day cleaning up the outbuilding where we store our food, in readiness for the arrival of a whole pig's worth of bangers in the next day or two. We really need to kill the two remaining pigs, and also a few lambs, but one of the freezers is going to need defrosting before that.

26TH JANUARY

Checked the sheep first thing and then set up in the shed ready for the vet to do the first half of our annual herd TB test. The vet came to do the test mid afternoon and will be back later in the week to see if the cattle are clear.

The technician from the solar panel people rang today to book the EPC inspection for Friday. If we pass this time, we will have solar panels before long, which is quite exciting, as we have been trying to do this for several years.

Planned to have sausages for dinner, but the abattoir hadn't finished making them, so we had vegetable soup instead!

27TH JANUARY

Dealt with some of the ram lambs whose horns needed attention.

Cutting them off using a wire saw is relatively simple, and a better option for the animal if the horns are a poor shape and threaten to grow into the head.

Tim went to get the sausages from the abattoir – all 220lb of them! We really should get the pigs killed before they get so big! Spent the evening bagging them up for the freezer. Most of them are plain pork, but there are also some with leek, some peppered, and some with sweet chilli.

28TH JANUARY

Took five fat lambs to market. These will be the final ones sold, as the remaining few are for home consumption.

Brought in the old heavy-horned ram, as he's gone very lame – probably nothing serious. The most likely cause is mud balled up between his toes, making them sore. We'll let his hooves dry out for a day or so and then take a closer look.

29TH JANUARY

Tim hung a new yard gate that he bought a few days ago. The old gate has been in place since before I first came here twenty-two years ago, and it's been struggling since Tim crunched it with the tractor.

Installed some more insulation downstairs in the extension.

The vet came to read the TB test: all clear! Sausages for dinner.

30TH JANUARY

The inspector came to do the EPC inspection for the house and the technical survey for the solar panel installation. Had a call later in the day to say that we had passed. They are coming to fit the panels on 2nd February – no hanging around then!

31ST JANUARY

We have been seeing a few rats lately, so Tim cleaned up around where the animal feed is stored and put down some poison. We will have to keep a sharp eye open for any rats that look dopey and make sure we get to them before the cats do.

Pruned the blackcurrants.

Took a feed block out for the ewes carrying singles.

Sausage casserole for dinner, then baked bread, cookies and muffins.



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CHICKENS

Down to business

**PART
TWO**

Terry Beebe considers ways to make your **poultry business** a **success**, including **marketing, packaging, integrity** and adopting a **professional** approach to potential customers



An excellent Cuckoo Maran hen – a reasonable layer of dark brown eggs, and potentially a dual-purpose breed.

Last month I tried to look realistically at the prospect of making your hobby pay – not with the intention of creating a poultry equivalent of Alan Sugar, but rather the more realistic plan to create a situation where income exceeds outgoings. Many people have already done it, and most of them with honesty and integrity, but, sadly, some have taken a more cynical route, as featured in Home Farmer last year. Unfortunately, it is this dishonest minority you will have to watch out for, or your plans could be scuppered at an early stage.

It's worth emphasising again that running a poultry business is really no different from running any kind of business: you will need to work diligently, make your product stand out from everyone else's, and create a reputation that inspires your current customers to recommend you to their friends – the best and easiest way for any new business to grow.

Last month we looked at the general requirements, such as space, time and investment, together with a brief look at incubation, as producing your own stock will have to be part of your business plan if you are to run effectively as a business. This month I shall look at some of the more visible aspects of running your

business, especially from the point of view of your potential customers: the quality of your product, your marketing and your packaging. Equally important is your integrity as a trader, in that it might be easy to sell if you exaggerate the quality of your product, but it will be impossible to sell again, and repeat business and recommendations are critical, especially for any new business. Always be honest – it may lose you an occasional sale if you cannot meet a person's requirements, but that will ultimately be appreciated and may bring you in further business. At least you will be able to hold your head up in the knowledge that you behaved impeccably.

QUALITY

The quality of your product – your investment, in fact – is related directly to the effort that you put in, and the imagination that you demonstrate in bringing it to the market. If you cannot put in the time to keep your poultry in healthy and hygienic conditions, you might as well give up now. Cutting costs that devalue your product is short-sighted, and if you feel you have to do it because the business is not going as planned, then

stop the business now! Your birds will be suffering and you will eventually risk prosecution.

DEALING WITH CUSTOMERS

Most customers will want to know a little about the birds they might be purchasing, so this will mean inviting people to visit your premises. Customers today are smart, and if you deny them the opportunity of seeing the stock they are buying they will quite rightfully see this as a reason to be wary. Working from a normal house rather than a smallholding is not a problem as long as your birds are well kept; most businesses started small, but grew because customers kept coming back. Talk to prospective customers at length about your birds – most people buy from people they like, so being open, friendly and informative will certainly give you a decent prospect of selling birds or eggs. Being furtive and evasive, on the other hand, will lose you sales, so keep a daily record of your birds, including ages, and be prepared to talk at length about them





Remember!

If you are already a good poultry keeper, then you are part of the way there – but running a business also requires paperwork and accounts!

The Cream Legbar is not a dual-purpose bird, but a good layer of lovely pale green eggs.

“YOU WILL NEED TO WORK DILIGENTLY, MAKE YOUR PRODUCT STAND OUT FROM EVERYONE ELSE’S, AND CREATE A REPUTATION THAT INSPIRES YOUR CURRENT CUSTOMERS TO RECOMMEND YOU TO THEIR FRIENDS”

– this will demonstrate your passion and impress a prospective customer.

When selling, whether eggs or live birds, your product needs to be both top quality and precisely as advertised. For example, when selling a point of lay pullet, tell the customer the correct age. The term is used for a bird from about 16 weeks of age, although the bird will probably not begin laying until it is 22 or 23 weeks old – a potential wait of up to 7 weeks before laying begins. If selling live birds, always make sure they are fit and healthy, with no sign of disease, lice or any other problems which might earn you a bad reputation. If selling eggs and meat, there are specific rules to which you will have to adhere, and these become mandatory if you have over 50 birds. The information relating to this is readily available online, together with lots of other useful information at: www.gov.uk/poultry-farms-general-regulations, and www.gov.uk/poultry-health.

MARKETING

Without proper marketing your customer base will certainly remain very thin on the ground. Traditionally, marketing would have been expensive, but today, with facebook and twitter (and other online social media sites) it is available to almost everyone for minimum cost and just a little effort. Both sites have lots of activity from poultry keepers, and social media is now the favoured means of communication for such fledgling businesses. Do not, however, use it as a means of pushing your product down the throats of potential customers, as this will backfire very quickly. The activity is viewed by many as being primarily social, and any overtly business approach will make you unpopular. Use it to outline any background behind your business which will be of interest, and to provide details of your birds – preferably anecdotal. You are showing the human story behind



If you keep your birds in good condition in the garden, that is a good starting point for your venture.

your business, and this will make you stand out from the crowd. If managed well it will pay off, too, as people get to know you and follow you, so spend an allotted amount of time each day communicating with potential customers. Just make sure that any statements you make are accurate and verifiable, and use actual pictures of your own birds, not someone else's champion.

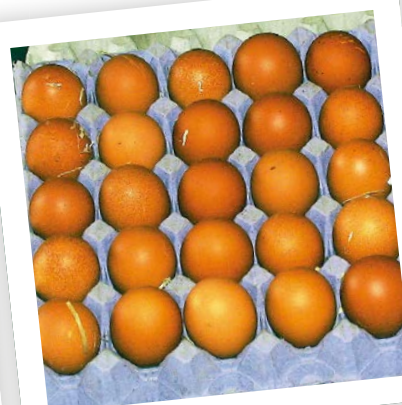
There are also a number of magazines which are read by poultry enthusiasts, including Home Farmer. If you have an interesting story to tell, contact them, and the same goes for your local paper. A local market is easier to tap into than a long distance one, so this will be productive if your approach pays off. Most local reporters are run off their feet, so if you can write the piece and provide photos you will be viewed as a breath of fresh air, and who knows – you may even get your own regular poultry column.

Below: You may decide to get involved with events, and this can open up a wealth of new opportunities, especially if you exhibit your birds.

PACKAGING

Trading locally is certainly worth considering for anyone looking to sell either birds or eggs, but most successful poultry businesses, whether large or small, find that they have to sell nationwide if they are to grow. How your customers respond to your product will often be down to the quality of your packaging – the first thing to create a response as the item arrives. Sadly, it is now almost impossible to get anyone to transport live birds, especially in small quantities, although a few companies will do it at considerable cost. It is a very different matter in the USA, where you can actually send birds through the post; this leaves me cold, as I am aware of a number of situations where birds have died in transit. If selling birds, either deliver them yourself, or get the person buying to collect them. This will mean that only sales above a certain value will be economical, but it is normal practice, and buyers generally prefer to do it this way.

Below: Welsummer eggs for hatching.



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Eggs can go by post, although it can never be guaranteed how they will arrive. There is a risk, although I have done it myself on many occasions and they have always arrived in perfect condition.

POTENTIAL PITFALLS

When starting any new enterprise it is always worth trying to get a feel for the market. Chicken keeping remains very popular and does not seem to have suffered much during the recession, but look at the local area and find out who you might be in competition with. If the market is already flooded, you will struggle to sell your product, and being the latest entrant will prove a problem unless you can add something extra special to the market. If you plan to sell eggs and cannot do so, remember that they have a limited life – if they end up in the dustbin there's not much profit to be had! There's also a limited number you can eat yourself, although there are a number of egg cookbooks aimed at chicken keepers looking to use up a glut.

Birds can also be susceptible to disease, and any birds that have suffered from a respiratory disease can be impossible to sell – so no profit, just vets' bills. Take good care of your stock, and buy-in only the best quality you can afford, then keep all new stock quarantined until you are sure they are 100% fit and healthy. Illness can spread rapidly through a healthy flock if an unhealthy bird is suddenly introduced. Try not to buy-in birds – hatch and rear your own if possible – but if buying-in birds, do as your own customers would and insist on seeing the stock they are derived from.

Right: A Rhode Island Red cockerel. This breed is available as both show quality and as a commercial strain.

Below: A padded egg box for sending eggs by post.



Buying from events and auctions is fine, but keep any birds isolated until you are certain they are healthy.

THE NEVER-ENDING COCKEREL QUESTION

This problem persists for all poultry keepers who breed their own birds – in any hatching it is most likely there will be a majority of male birds. These are only needed if you intend to breed, but you will certainly only need a limited amount for this purpose. It is also certain that if you are likely to have problems, it will be caused by cockerels – neighbours complaining about the noise, and local authorities pursuing the matter. Sadly, the market for young cockerels is less than non-existent, so you will have the option of keeping them at great cost and inconvenience, culling them at a very early stage, or eating them yourself after rearing them to a certain size. It's a very difficult question, but one that all prospective poultry breeders should answer, well before taking up the challenge.

If this all sounds reasonable enough and you feel that you really could make

a go of it, then it is up to you to put your plan into action. Talk it over with family members and friends, and ask for their honest advice – a good friend will always be straight with you. If you are already a good poultry keeper, then you are part of the way there. But remember, running a business also requires paperwork and accounts, and this is the reason many new businesses fail. Most accountants will be happy to discuss your business proposal, and if they feel it falls short they will usually let you know in no uncertain way. If this sounds a little more daunting than simply being a chicken keeper, why not slide yourself more gently into the world of commerce by simply doing what you are doing now, but giving just a little more thought to all the different aspects of turning your hobby into a business – that way you can perhaps enjoy the best of both worlds without turning your life upside down, but with a hobby that either costs very little or even supplements your income, if you get things right.

Below: A Welsummer hen – a reliable layer of rich brown eggs.



The IXWORTH

Terry Beebe looks at the **Ixworth**, an ideal, white, **dual-purpose** bird that **almost died out** between 1950 and 1970, but was **saved** by a small band of **enthusiasts**

Over the years many breeds of poultry have been developed to provide dual-purpose birds, giving both a table bird *and* a reasonably good layer.

The Ixworth is a superb example of such a breed, and its development was begun in 1932 in the Suffolk village of Ixworth by Mr Reginald Appleyard. The process eventually came to fruition in 1939 when the Ixworth made its very first appearance.

Mr Appleyard was also responsible for the Silver Appleyard duck, and was a man with considerable experience in the field of poultry and waterfowl. To create the Ixworth, he used White Old English Game, Jubilee Indian Game, White Sussex, White Orpington and White Minorca, which gave the bird a combination of a wide breast and fine white skin in a fast-maturing bird – an ideal combination for any table bird. In many ways the Ixworth could probably be described as the real

forerunner of today's fast-growing commercial table birds, although at a time when chicken was still an expensive meat, the concept would have been strange.

After several years, the breed's early popularity began to wane, and it almost disappeared between 1950 and 1970, only surviving thanks to the efforts of a small number of extremely dedicated breeders. In fact, it is still not out of danger today and is classed as both rare and on the critical list. It is, however, becoming popular as an exhibition bird and is classified as a 'Heavy Rare Breed'. When the bird is judged for exhibition the main points awarded are for merit as a table bird.

There was a bantam version of the breed that was created in 1938, but it disappeared before the war and it has never been recreated. I have certainly never seen one.

The Ixworth is an easy breed to keep, with no particular problems provided they are looked after correctly. They do become quite heavy, so high perches should be avoided to prevent damage to legs and feet. Taking weight and size into consideration, always allow a decent-sized nest box, and also bear in mind that the breed is not among the most reliable of sitters, so an incubator is advisable for any hatching.

The breed does not have its own club and is represented by the Rare Breeds Society in the UK – contact for details and available stock can be made through the society registrar.



BREED DESCRIPTION

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

The bird should be both active and alert. The body needs to be deep and well rounded, being fairly long but compact, with a long, flat back with a full broad breast that is well fleshed and rounded off for the entire length of the body. The wings should be carried close to the body, and the tail, which is of medium length, should be carried fairly low. Ixworths should have a broad head with heavy brows, a short, stout beak, and prominent eyes that should be either red or bright orange. The comb

is pea-type, and both the ear lobes and wattles are medium sized. The neck is erect with short, close-fitting hackle feathers. The legs should be well apart and of reasonable length, with thighs well fleshed and free from feathers. All four toes should be straight and well spread. The structure of the bone is characteristic of a first-class table bird, and the plumage should be close fitting and tight. Egg colour varies, although they should be tinted.

The full standard for the breed is

detailed in the *British Poultry Standards* book, from which the information for this article has been taken.

WEIGHTS

A cock should be around 4.1kg (9lb) and a cockerel 3.6kg (8lb). A hen should be around 3.2kg (7lb) and a pullet 2.7kg (6lb).

GET BUSY!

Assembling a brood box

Claire Waring describes the **construction** of a flat-pack **National brood box**

Last month we looked at various hive designs, considered the importance of the bee-space, examined different types of queen excluder and methods of frame spacing.

When you actually get round to buying a hive, equipment suppliers will be happy to sell you one that is made up and ready to go, even to the extent of containing frames filled with foundation. If you are in a real hurry to provide a home for a colony of bees, or if you really do have three thumbs, this might be the way to go. However, it obviously comes at a price. Most bee-keepers are usually sufficiently handy with a hammer, and so buy hives in flat-packs. Just like flat-pack furniture, this means that the parts are already cut to size, and all you need to do is put it together.

You may well have been flummoxed in the past by the instructions that came with your flat-pack desk, but with a flat-pack hive you are generally on your own! Some suppliers may include instructions, but mostly they don't.

SO, WHERE DO YOU START?

If this is your very first beehive and you have never seen one 'in the flesh', take a look at the catalogues or at the online websites to get an idea of how they work.

We will deal with the brood box first, and my comments will refer to the (Modified) National hive design. You will have to translate them if you are making up another type, although those such as the Langstroth are much easier. The minor complication with the National is that there are fillets at the top and bottom of two opposite sides, making the construction slightly more fiddly. However, with all the pieces ready cut for you, the main thing you have to concentrate on is getting the bits the right way round!

The first thing to do is to check that you have a complete brood box.

This consists of two deep walls, two shallower walls, two square top fillets, two bottom fillets chamfered to shed the rain, two metal runners, nails for the woodwork and small pins to fix the runners.

Next you need to gather the necessary tools. Some sort of vice will make things much easier, as it gives you a third hand. I used a Workmate. Mind you, it took a couple of hours to work out how that went together – and that was with instructions! A brood box is much easier.

You will need a hammer and a set square or a ruler. The box will be much stronger if you glue the joints with waterproof glue – PVA glue, or the wonderfully named 'Gorilla Glue', will suit. Although the Gorilla Glue instructions tell you to wet the surfaces before application, this tends to make it set very quickly. Applying it to a dry surface gives you more time for manoeuvre, and the moisture in the wood and in the atmosphere will work to set the glue quickly enough. A sharp knife and sandpaper are useful to smooth any rough edges. The joints should fit tightly together, but you may have to shave a fraction off. If you decide only to glue your box together (not really recommended, as it needs to be robust), you will need a pair of sash cramps and some scrap pieces of wood to spread the pressure.

Now you are ready to start, but I suggest you have a dry run first. This will enable you to work out how everything goes together, and will also show up any discrepancies in the factory woodwork. The deep sides are the ones to which the lugs are attached. Glue the insides of the joints in one end of one side and use a flat piece of stick or similar to spread it out evenly. Now fix it in the vice so that it sits proud, then put glue on the contacting surfaces of one end of the fillet and spread it out. Put it in position and, holding it firmly in place, knock one nail through the joint. Repeat with the other fillet.

A WORD OF WARNING!

Check that the fillets are the right way round. The rebates go *inside*, with the groove in the deep side, and the chamfer should be at the top of the lower fillet – see Step 9.

Turn the side through 180° and fix it in the vice again. Attach the other fillets to the opposite end of the shallow side, making sure that you match the top and bottom ones with their opposite numbers. You now have a flat piece of wood with four fillets sticking up – one at each corner.

The second deep side now fits on the other ends of the fillets (again, making sure the groove faces *inwards*). This gives you a box shape. Now you will appreciate why you need to get the grooves in the right place, because the shallow sides slide down these.

The National hive has a 'bottom bee-space', so the shallow side must not go down until it is flush with the deep side. As a rough guide, the edges of the shallow side should line up with the rebates on the fillets. However, if you want your brood box to have the correct bee-space, you need to adjust things at this stage.

The most important thing is for the tops of your frames to be level with the top of the box when they sit on the metal runners. To ensure this is so, you need a frame (or at least a top bar). By placing the runner in position with the curved edge resting on the rebate and the flat side extending down the side of the box, you can then rest the frame on the runner and adjust the position of the shallow side until everything is in place.

Run glue into the two grooves at one side of the box and slide in the shallow side. You may have to push quite hard or give it a helping hand with the hammer. If the latter, use a piece of scrap wood to make sure you don't dent the edge of the box. All the boxes in your hive need to



“IT DOESN'T MATTER HOW THICK THE TIMBER IS OR HOW ROUGH IT LOOKS – THE BEES WON'T CARE. WHAT THEY WILL CARE ABOUT IS IF THE BEE-SPACE INSIDE IS NOT RIGHT”



Top Tip!

Make sure the angles are square – use a set square or, if you haven't got one, measure the diagonals and ensure they are equal.

fit tightly together to prevent robbing by wasps or other bees. Now, adjust it as above and repeat this with the other side. Your frame should now lie flush with the sides of the brood box.

Before you nail everything in place, there is one final adjustment to make. You need to make sure the angles are square. You can use a set square or, if you haven't got one, measure the diagonals and make sure they are equal. At this stage, the box can be reshaped using gentle pressure on opposite corners. Once you hammer in the nails, you won't be able to square things up if they are wonky. If you have some sash cramps, you can use them to keep the box square while you nail it together.

Nail through the deep walls into the end of the shallow walls, looking down the length to judge where the nails should go – three, evenly spaced, should be sufficient. Repeat this with the other shallow wall, then wipe off any excess glue.

Now you have a brood box nearly ready to go. If it is made of western red cedar, it does not need treating, although you might like to apply some linseed oil. To keep it looking good, you will need to repeat this each year. While western red cedar was the preferred timber, hives made out of deal can last just as long if treated well. You can also paint them, preferably with a special hive paint available from equipment suppliers. You can also apply 5 Star Cuprinol® wood treatment to the *outside*. In this case, make sure the box is well aired and ceases to smell before putting bees into it.

If you are very handy and have access to lots of 'scrap' wood, you can make your own hive from scratch. If you can saw straight, you can make a beehive. Be careful to get the internal dimensions correct, though. It doesn't matter how thick the timber is or how rough it looks – the bees won't care. What they will care about is if the bee-space inside is not right. You can purchase hive plans from www.honeyshop.co.uk/bbno.html#hiveplans.

Making up a super is done in exactly the same way as a brood box, except the box is shallower.

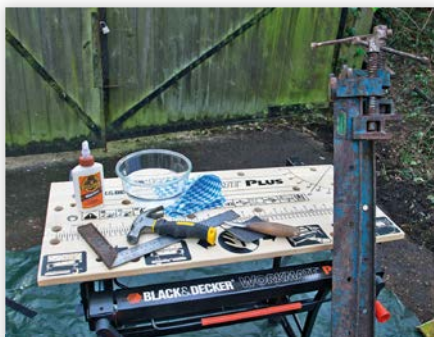
STEP-BY-STEP BROOD BOX ASSEMBLY GUIDE



01 All the ready-cut parts come in a flat-pack.



02 The flat-pack contents.



03 You will need a hammer, waterproof glue and a set square or ruler. A vice is very useful, as is a sharp knife and sandpaper.



04 First, apply glue (here Gorilla Glue) inside the joint in the deep wall...



05 ...then spread it out evenly.



06 Apply glue to the parts of the fillet that will touch the deep wall.



07 Fit the fillet into the deep wall...



08 ...hold firmly and secure the joint using a single nail.

NEXT MONTH

We will make up a hive roof and look at floors.



09 Make sure the chamfer is uppermost. This is the bottom of the brood box.



13 Using a frame to test the position of the shallow wall – here it is too low.



16 Before going any further, make sure the angles are square.



10 Repeat the process to fit the other deep wall to the fillets.



14 Here, the runner on the shallow wall supports the frame flush with the top of the box. Perfect!



17 When everything is in the right position, nail into the end of the shallow walls through the thickness of the deep wall.



11 Run glue (here PVA waterproof glue) down the groove.



15 Generally, the side wall will be flush with the rebate. It does not matter too much if it is slightly out; it is the top that is important.



18 The runners can now be fixed in place using the escutcheon pins.



12 Sliding the shallow side down the groove – another pair of hands always helps.



19 Congratulations, you have just completed your brood box. Treat or paint it as you will before giving it to your bees.

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LET IT ROOT!

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**PRESERVE YOUR
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HAND CARE

DIY creams and salves

Ruth Tott prepares a range of practical fragranced **creams** and **salves** to **rejuvenate** the tired hands of **gardeners** and **crafters**

Hands that do dishes – and gardening, and sewing, and everything else – need a bit of love, care and attention, and especially when age becomes a factor, as your skin dries out quicker as it loses some of its natural elasticity. It is also important if you're working a lot outdoors, open to all the extreme elements the British climate can throw at you.

The recipes in this article are for soothing creams rather than healing creams, and any actual healing is yet to be proven – research for white willow bark puts it at anything between 0% and 15% effective – but the act of rubbing a soothing cream into your hands is, at the very least, therapeutic, and it also helps the circulation, if only by the gentle rubbing action.

Changing the ratios of the hard and soft oils used is the only real difference between making a hand cream or a salve. A salve is traditionally hard and therefore doesn't require the hydrosol (water) that hand creams contain, and this makes them far easier to create, as it doesn't take as much time to blend the oil, water and wax together.

Of course, getting these three elements to 'play nicely' and give the hand cream its desired consistency takes quite a bit of time and attention – a little like making mayonnaise, in fact. It's better, therefore, to make small batches and experiment to get your own ideal end product. Remember, too, that the consistency and the colour will change as it cools down, and a home-made cream will often be slightly greasier than a shop-bought one due to the industrial process involved and the emulsifiers used.

Equipment-wise, there's really good news – you don't actually need to invest in anything special. You just need a bowl that fits inside a saucepan for a basic bain-marie or double boiler (pictured right), some measuring cups and spoons, a whisk or food processor, and some suitable empty containers.

Some of the oils that you need will have to be bought-in specially, but they are all readily available. I get almond oil and coconut oil from our local Asian supermarket at a fraction of the price charged by mainstream outlets, and beeswax pellets are available from hobby outlets or online.

When adding flavours to your concoctions, use essential oils or punctured vitamin E oil capsules. You can purchase white willow bark online, but it's quite pricey. Alternatively, try grinding a couple of aspirins into a powder – willow is the active ingredient – and use that instead. It comes with a warning, though – don't overuse it, as the aspirin will gradually lose its effectiveness!





**“I GET ALMOND OIL AND COCONUT OIL
FROM OUR LOCAL ASIAN SUPERMARKET
AT A FRACTION OF THE PRICE CHARGED
BY MAINSTREAM OUTLETS...”**



BASIC MOISTURISING HAND CREAM

A basic recipe is the starting point for experimenting with texture and fragrance to discover the ideal product for your own hands.

INGREDIENTS

- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 1/4 cup sweet almond oil
- 1/4 cup coconut oil
- 1/8 cup beeswax pastilles
- 1/2 cup orange flower water or rose water
- 10–15 drops essential oil of your choice

METHOD

- 1 Have your bain-marie prepared and waiting on a low heat. Measure out your oils, then put them all into a suitable bowl and place on the bain-marie.
- 2 Let the coconut oil melt fully (it is the most solid of the oils and takes longest), then add the beeswax (this will take far longer to melt than the oils).

RUTH'S TIP!

If you buy a bottle of coconut oil, save time by putting the bottle into a pan of hot water to melt (below left).

- 3 Now comes the tricky part: put the oils and wax into a blender (or leave them in the bowl, but remove from the bain-marie if mixing by hand). Be careful not to burn your hands when you remove the bowl from the pan.

Top middle: Beeswax pastilles.

Above right: Adding the arnica oil.

Below middle: Whisking the oils and wax together.

Below right: Put back in the bowl and add the essential oils.

Far right: White willow bark.

- 4 Add the orange flower water (or rose water) in just a trickle so that it becomes fully incorporated and combined with the oils and wax. Once it's all 'joined together', return it to the bowl and add the essential oils while continuing to whisk.
- 5 Pour it into your chosen container and leave it to settle.





ARNICA AND CAYENNE PEPPER HAND SALVE

This simple salve is great for hands and fingers suffering from osteoarthritis. Unless you are really flash with the cash, don't think about buying dried *Arnica montana* flowers – you will need a mortgage to do so! Instead, you can get small bottles of liquid extract at a fraction of the cost from health food shops or online. Your fingers will tingle actively, as they do after using ibuprofen gel, but get those gardening gloves on and there's nothing that will stop you!

INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup coconut oil
- 1/8 cup almond oil
- 10 drops arnica liquid extract
- 1 1/2 tbsp dried cayenne pepper powder
- 1/4 cup beeswax pastilles

METHOD

- 1 Melt the coconut oil in a bain-marie, then add the almond oil and then the beeswax.
- 2 Once everything has melted, add the arnica liquid and leave for 1 hour over a very, very gentle heat.



- 3 Add the cayenne pepper and leave over the heat to infuse for a further 2 hours.
- 4 Pour into your chosen container and leave to solidify.

WARNING!

Don't use this on cracked hands, and keep it away from your eyes and nose.

REALLY COOL ARNICA SALVE

This is really good for sore joints, but as before, *don't use it on cracked skin, and keep it away from your eyes and nose.*

INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup coconut oil
- 5 drops arnica liquid extract
- 8 drops peppermint essential oil
- 1/4 cup beeswax pastilles
- 3 drops eucalyptus or lavender essential oil

METHOD

Make exactly as for ARNICA AND CAYENNE PEPPER HAND SALVE, but add the essential oil during the cooling process and stir well to mix it in.

REALLY WARM ARNICA SALVE

This is more involved than the previous method, as you need to steep the spices in oil to infuse them.

INGREDIENTS

- 2 tsp dry ground ginger
- 2 tsp cinnamon
- 1/4 cup dry, powdered white willow bark, or 2 aspirin tablets ground up
- 1/2 cup almond oil
- 1/2 cup coconut oil
- 1/2 cup beeswax pastilles
- The contents of 2 vitamin E capsules

METHOD

FOR THE WARMING SPICED OIL

- 1 Steep the dried spices and willow bark in the almond oil in a bowl over a low heat overnight. If using powdered aspirin, leave it out at this stage. I used a slow cooker overnight and put the almond oil and spices inside in a covered jar together with water. You could also do it the 'green' way by putting it on a windowsill in strong sunshine.
- 2 When ready, strain the oil through cheesecloth to remove the spice and willow bark particles.

FOR THE SALVE

- 3 Put the oil back into the bowl, place it on the bain-marie and add the coconut oil and beeswax. Leave it to melt, then stir together.
- 4 Remove from the heat and add the contents of the vitamin E capsules and the powdered aspirin (if you're using it in place of the willow bark). Stir in well, making sure the powder has dissolved, then pour into your chosen containers.

If you want to try a little experimentation without any real hassle, to see what you can produce, try using an unperfumed, shop-bought hand cream as a base, and add your favourite fragrances to create your own special formula.



GRAND TOUR

Shropshire & Staffordshire

This month **LizzieB**'s mobile kitchen draws its influences from **Shropshire** and **Staffordshire**, with **Simmel Cake**, **Shrewsbury Cakes**, **Fidgit Pie** and **Lobby**

Shropshire (formerly known as Salop) is famous for its wide range of fresh home-grown foods, and for a number of microbreweries producing a variety of different specialist beers and ales. Food festivals are plentiful, and some towns have become acknowledged 'foodie' hotspots, with Ludlow in particular now known as 'a little bit of France near the Welsh border'. Some local recipes date back hundreds of years, and I have included some heritage recipes this month, including Simmel Cake and Shrewsbury Cakes, and a modern variation on the traditional Fidgit Pie.

Staffordshire is renowned for its potteries and industry, but it, too, has a food heritage – Staffordshire cheese has been given Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) status by the EU, joining the likes of Jersey new potatoes and Newcastle Brown Ale. And, of course, where there is cheese there should always be Branston Pickle, which was officially created in Burton upon Trent at Branston Lodge in 1922, although the recipe is no doubt much older. Yeomanry Pudding, Oatcakes, and Staffordshire Fruit Cake are just a few of the other heritage recipes from Staffordshire, but one recipe in particular appealed to me,

and that was Lobby. I have included a recipe for this traditional dish below, but with a modern twist using another ingredient from Staffordshire – Marmite. Marmite was invented in the late 1800s by German scientist, Justus von Liebig, but, from 1902, was marketed in Burton upon Trent by the Marmite Food Extract Company.

SIMMEL CAKE

Simmel cake dates back hundreds of years and was traditionally made for Mothering Sunday, but is now an Easter staple. There are various regional

recipes, but the best known, and most widely followed, originates in Shropshire. This version has a layer of marzipan not only on the top, but also *within* the fruit cake, giving it an extra flavoursome and moist texture, and it has decorative, symbolic marzipan balls on top.

INGREDIENTS

175g salted butter
175g soft brown sugar
3 large eggs, beaten
175g plain flour
½ tsp ground cinnamon
½ tsp ground cloves
½ tsp mixed spice
400g mixed, dried fruits
1 tbsp dark rum (optional)
2 tbsp apricot jam
Beaten egg white (for browning – optional)
900g ready-made marzipan

METHOD

- 1 Preheat the oven to 140°C.
- 2 Cream the butter and sugar together in a large bowl until pale and fluffy, then gradually beat in the eggs until well mixed.
- 3 Sift in the flour and spices and stir well to combine, then add the mixed, dried fruit and rum (if using).
- 4 Divide the marzipan into two large portions and set aside one smaller piece for the decoration. Roll out the larger pieces into 18cm rounds.
- 5 Place half the cake mixture into a greased and lined 18cm cake tin, smooth the top and cover with one of the marzipan rounds. Top with the remaining cake mixture and smooth over the surface.
- 6 Bake on the middle shelf of the oven for 90 minutes until the cake has risen and cooked, then remove it and place on a wire rack to cool.
- 7 Once cooled, brush the top of the cake with the apricot jam and put the remaining marzipan round on top. Divide the smaller piece of marzipan into balls and place on top of the cake (see LIZZIEB'S TIP!).
- 8 If you want to colour your cake, brush the top of the cake and the marzipan balls with beaten egg white and place under a hot grill for 2 minutes to brown the top.

LIZZIEB'S TIP!

Simnel cake has always been decorated with marzipan balls, and you would traditionally have used 11 balls of marzipan to represent the disciples minus Judas, or 12 balls



Each year over 20,000 attend the Ludlow Food Festival.



(with one in the middle) to include Jesus. One of the earliest mentions of Simnel cake is by poet Robert Herrick in the early 17th century:

*I'll to thee a Simnell bring
'Gainst thou go'st a mothering,
So that, when she blesseth thee,
Half that blessing thou'lt give to me.*

SHREWSBURY CAKES

Although called cakes, Shrewsbury Cakes are actually thick, crisp, shortbread-like biscuits delicately flavoured with rose water. They were originally thought to have been created in the late 1700s by a baker in Shrewsbury. Some versions are flavoured with orange and lemon peel and studded with dried fruit. For this recipe I have gone with rose water, which can be easily found in a number of high-street supermarkets and in some health

food shops. The traditional method of making the biscuits describes them being patted and not rolled, and using a large glass to create the rounds.

INGREDIENTS

MAKES 12–15 CAKES

225g butter, chilled and diced
175g caster sugar
225g plain flour
1 tbsp rose water
1 egg white, beaten
A little caster sugar (for dusting)

METHOD

- 1 Place the flour and sugar in a large bowl and rub in the butter until the mixture has the texture of fine breadcrumbs.

- 2 Gradually add the beaten egg white and the rose water and bring together to form a dough, then gently work the dough together using your hands to form a ball. Wrap the dough in cling film and chill in the fridge for at least 30 minutes.
- 3 Preheat the oven to 180°C.
- 4 Pat out the dough on a lightly floured surface until it is about 2cm thick, then, using a pint glass (if you have one) or a large cutter, cut out rounds and transfer them to a lined baking sheet. Prick the tops with a fork and dust lightly with caster sugar.
- 5 Bake in the oven for 15 minutes until crisp and golden brown, then remove and leave to cool on a wire rack.

LIZZIEB'S TIP!

These biscuits freeze really well and maintain their buttery crisp texture if frozen correctly. To freeze, line a rigid container with greaseproof paper and place a layer of biscuits in the bottom. Repeat this with a further layer of paper, followed by a layer of biscuits, until the container is full, then cover the top with greaseproof paper and seal with a lid. They can be frozen for up to 6 months. To defrost them, keep the biscuits sealed in the container until fully defrosted.

FIDGIT PIE

This is a real heritage recipe from the county that was in danger of becoming lost until it was recently revitalised by TV's *Hairy Bikers*. There are a number of theories surrounding the name of the pie; 'Fitchet' was a 17th-century word for a weasel or polecat, and some believe that was the original ingredient. Others believe the name derives from its appearance – the 'fitched' five-sided shape. This particular recipe is my

variation on some of the traditional recipes, and it uses gammon or ham for the filling. It can be made whole or as individual smaller pies and can be eaten hot or cold, making it perfect for picnics.

INGREDIENTS

SERVES 6–8

FOR THE SHORTCRUST PASTRY

225g plain flour
50g butter
50g lard
A pinch of salt
Ice-cold water

FOR THE FILLING

2 large eating apples, cored and diced
2 onions, peeled and diced
125ml cider
600g potatoes, peeled and diced
300g cooked gammon or ham, shredded or cut into bite-sized pieces
1 egg, beaten
50g butter (for frying)
Milk (or cream) and butter (for mashing)

METHOD

- 1 To make the pastry, place the flour and salt in a large bowl and add the fat, then rub them together to make a breadcrumb-like texture.
- 2 Add a little of the iced water to form a dough, then gently knead together using your hands to form a smooth ball. Wrap the ball in cling film (or a sandwich bag) and place it in the fridge to chill for 15 minutes.
- 3 Preheat the oven to 180°C and place a flat baking sheet (large enough for your pie dish to sit on) in to heat.
- 4 Add the potatoes to a large pan of salted, boiling water and cook until soft, but not mushy, for 15–20 minutes.

- 5 Once cooked, remove from the heat, drain and return to the pan, together with a dollop of butter and a dash of milk (or cream), then mash and leave to one side to chill.
- 6 Gently melt the butter and fry the onions in a heavy-based pan over a medium heat for 3–5 minutes until soft and translucent, then add the apples and the cider and simmer gently for a further 3–4 minutes.
- 7 Remove from the heat and allow to cool.
- 8 Remove the pastry from the fridge and divide into two pieces – about three-quarters of the pastry for the base and the remainder for the lid. Roll out the larger portion and line a lightly greased pie dish.
- 9 Divide the mashed potato into two and place one portion into the pastry case to line the bottom, gently pushing it down using the back of a spoon to avoid any air pockets. Next, cover the potato with half of the apple and onion mixture and top with half of the gammon or ham. Repeat the layering using up the remaining ingredients.
- 10 Roll out the remaining pastry to form a lid, then brush the top pastry edges with the beaten egg and place on top. Crimp the edges together, brush the lid with the remainder of the beaten egg and make a couple of cuts in the top to allow the steam to escape.
- 11 Place the pie dish on the preheated baking sheet and bake for approximately 30 minutes until golden brown and fully cooked.

The pie can be eaten hot or cold. If serving hot, it is lovely with a rich, meaty gravy and green vegetables. It can be eaten cold on its own with home-made chutney or as a meal with a fresh, crisp salad.

LIZZIEB'S TIP!

To make smaller pies, I found a Yorkshire pudding tin worked best, and the above ingredients made 8 individual pies.

LOBBY

Lobby was created from the leftover scraps of the traditional Sunday roast, usually using the bones to enhance the flavour. Since most families could only afford the offal and gristle cuts of meat on offer at the butcher's, this formed the basis of the stew which, on the odd occasion, would also have been enhanced





Love it!

Marmite, named after a French earthenware pot, achieves annual sales of about £46m and is apparently requested as a 'rider' by the Rolling Stones.

boil. (*If cooking on the hob you will need the greater amount of stock.)

5a **IF COOKING ON A HOB:** cover with a lid or tinfoil once it is boiling, then reduce to a lively simmer and cook for 1½–2 hours, stirring occasionally.

5b **IF COOKING IN A CASSEROLE:** place in a preheated oven and cook for 2–2½ hours until the meat is tender and the vegetables are cooked through.

LIZZIE'S TIP!



You can make this with any combination of meat and root vegetables, and a good rule for the ingredients is to use 450g of meat, 225g of root vegetables and 350ml of stock. The flavouring in this particular recipe is boosted by Marmite, but if you don't like Marmite you can add either a tablespoon of mixed herbs or replace 250ml of the stock with a good, rich ale.

by a generous dash of ale and vegetables. There is no one recipe for lobby – many families had their own versions. The key to keeping it authentic is to use the one-pot method – either baked in the oven or cooked on the top of the stove. This recipe is one of my own, which used up some of the things I had left over, and I also added flavour with another local product, Marmite.

INGREDIENTS

SERVES 4

450g stewing steak, diced
150g white potatoes, peeled and roughly diced
4 sweet potatoes, peeled and roughly diced
2 onions, peeled and sliced
2 carrots, peeled and cut into chunks
1 tbsp Marmite
1 tbsp vegetable oil (for frying)
350–400ml beef stock *

METHOD

- 1 If cooking in the oven, preheat it to 160°C.
- 2 Heat the oil, then fry the onions for a few minutes in a heavy-based casserole dish (or pan, if cooking on a hob) until they begin to soften.
- 3 Add the steak and stir well to brown and seal the meat.
- 4 Add the remaining vegetables and fry for a further 2 minutes, then add the Marmite and stock and bring to the



FABULOUS

fermented food!

This month **Seren Evans-Charrington** uses **fermentation** to **preserve** and **enhance food** – an ancient form of **storing produce** that is actually less uncommon today than we might think

Throughout history, mankind has used fermentation to preserve food and improve its flavour. Today, we also know that fermentation offers nutritional benefits, but it's easy to dismiss fermented foods for fear they might taste dreadful, and it's worth bearing in mind that cheese, beer, wine and bread are *all* fermented foods, so it's not quite so alien to the modern diet after all.

Fermentation preserves food, with live-culture yeasts and bacteria producing alcohol, lactic acid and acetic acid – all 'biopreservatives' that retain nutrients and prevent spoilage. Vegetables, fruit, milk, fish and meat are highly perishable, and to extend their storage our ancestors used a variety of preserving techniques, including wild fermentation. Fermentation not only preserves nutrients, it also breaks them down into more digestible forms. Soya beans are very protein-rich but largely indigestible without fermentation, which breaks down their complex protein structure into digestible amino acids to give us the culinary delights of miso, tempeh and tamari (soy sauce).

I cannot talk about fermentation without mentioning the new nutrients this process can create, as they hold wonderful health benefits. Some live cultures have been shown to function as antioxidants, scavenging cancer precursors known as 'free radicals' from the cells of your body. Eating raw fermented foods is undoubtedly a good way of supplying your digestive tract with living cultures essential for breaking down foods and assimilating nutrients.

As fermented foods and drinks are quite literally alive with flavour and nutrition, I decided to begin a fermentation journey of experimentation and discovery, starting by ordering some milk kefir grains. The morning they arrived I ripped open the parcel to reveal a small sealed package of milky grains – my live milk kefir grains – and in the presence of my two enthusiastic daughters (still in pyjamas), we got to work immediately, but not before naming our kefir grains 'Kitty'. So, with a sterilised coffee jar and 250ml of organic milk we began our milk kefir journey.

KEFIR MILK – THE FIRST BATCH

METHOD

- 1 Put your grains into a clean, glass 1-litre jar.
- 2 Add 250ml of full-fat goat's/cow's milk and leave the milk kefir grains to settle and feed.
- 3 Cover the jar with a doubled-over piece of muslin and secure it using a rubber band or string.
- 4 Place in a warm (but not hot) position out of direct sunlight and leave for 24 hours or until it begins to separate.
- 5 When the kefir has finished working, strain the grains (using a plastic strainer) from the kefir milk, but keep them safe – they are reusable.
- 6 The first batch of kefir milk is not as thick as consequent batches will be. I was advised to discard the first batch, as the grains are 'adjusting' to their new home, and it is usual for a first batch to taste yeasty.

Left: Straining the kefir grains.





Kefir

GRAINS OR STARTER?

- * Kefir grains are the most traditional, economical and nutrient-dense way to make kefir.
- * Kefir grains are reusable, and with proper care can be used indefinitely. They are certainly the best value in the long term, but you need to look after them: culturing for 12–48 hours and then transferring the grains to fresh milk to make a new batch.
- * Powdered kefir starter culture is created in a laboratory and designed for single use, but can be utilised a few times before weakening – ideal if you are not able to maintain it on a daily basis, or want to make kefir just occasionally.
- * If you use real kefir grains and want to take a break, put the grains in a jar with milk (as you would to make kefir), then cover with a tight-fitting lid and refrigerate. The cold slows the fermentation process and the grains become semi-dormant, but you must change the milk every week or two.
- * I ordered my grains from Happy Kombucha (www.happykombucha.co.uk), who use organic milk to grow their cultures. They cost £12.50, but this is good value considering the daily yield.



I ordered my grains from Happy Kombucha (www.happykombucha.co.uk), who use organic milk to grow their cultures. They cost £12.50, but this is good value considering the daily yield.

KEFIR MILK – SUBSEQUENT BATCHES

METHOD

- 1 When the kefir begins to separate, give it a stir with a *non-metallic* spoon.
- 2 Separate your milk kefir grains from your kefir drink by emptying the contents of the jar into a plastic strainer over a bowl.
- 3 The milk kefir drink will strain through and the grains can then be reused.
- 4 Wash the jar (or use a fresh jar) and place the grains and any residue they are in into the jar, then top up with a pint of fresh, organic milk and replace the muslin top.
- 5 Drink the kefir milk, and then the process begins again.

SEREN'S TIPS!

- * Less is more – letting cultures ferment for longer will *not* yield better results. Kefir is best when it's done fermenting at 24 hours, or when sour and tart like natural yoghurt. Letting it go for 48 hours or longer diminishes the probiotics, as the bacteria run out of food and start to die.
- * *No metals, please!* Use only plastic spoons, spatulas and sieves.
- * *Don't* wash your kefir grains in water – it washes off their protective coating of bacteria and yeasts, and they will be harmed. They can survive, but it diminishes the good bacteria and yeasts, and they won't be as strong.

USING KEFIR MILK

Kefir milk is a little like natural yoghurt and is used in much the same way. It can be consumed naturally, mixed with muesli or even made into ice cream.

My girls enjoy it with soft fruits blitzed for a few moments in the blender for a probiotic smoothie. I'm partial to a kefir smoothie myself, too, although my kefir bread recipe takes some beating in terms of taste.

KEFIR BREAD

The starter is simple to make and imparts a lovely flavour to the finished bread.

INGREDIENTS

FOR THE STARTER

320g strong white bread flour
½ pint kefir milk

METHOD

- 1 Add enough kefir milk to the flour in order to make a nice kneading bread dough.
- 2 Knead the dough until elastic and smooth, then place in a bowl, cover with cling film and leave overnight in a warm place – I leave mine in the airing cupboard.
- 3 Next day, when the dough is well risen and before it collapses, knock it back and go to the next step.

FOR THE DOUGH

750g strong white flour
430g rye flour
1 tbsp sea salt
7g easy-blend yeast
3 slugs of vegetable oil
1 tsp sugar
480ml warm water

METHOD

- 1 Move your starter to a larger bowl and add the flours, salt, yeast, sugar and oil.
- 2 Slowly add enough water to obtain a good, pliable kneading dough, then knead vigorously until smooth and elastic. Cover with oiled cling film (so it doesn't stick to the dough

and deflate it) or a damp cloth and leave to rise in a warm place until it doubles in size.

- 3 Knock it back, divide it into two equal portions and place in well-oiled tins. Cover with oiled cling film.
- 4 When well risen, remove the cling film and bake in a preheated oven at 220°C for 35–40 minutes, or until it sounds hollow when tapped.
- 5 Leave to cool on a rack.

FERMENTED VEGETABLES

With the kefir fermenting in the background, it was time to embrace the world of lacto-fermented vegetables, which at first sounds a bit frightening. Before I embraced kimchi, sauerkraut and other fermented foods, I had vague notions of lacto-fermentation involving milk, bacteria, and specimen jars mysteriously bubbling away in dark cupboards. Thankfully, I discovered that the world of fermented food is far from scary, and very tasty.

Lacto-fermentation doesn't necessarily have anything to do with dairy products – 'lacto' simply refers to lactic acid. All fruits and vegetables have beneficial bacteria such as lactobacillus on the surface, and in an anaerobic (oxygen-free) environment, these bacteria convert sugars into lactic acid, which inhibits harmful bacteria, acts as a preservative and gives fermented foods their characteristic tangy, sour flavour.

There is no need for special fermenting vessels or fancy equipment – if your vegetables are submerged in brine they are in an anaerobic environment and perfectly safe. If you want to weight them down you can, but I find a large cabbage leaf tucked over the top of the vegetables and down the insides of the jar is effective at keeping them submerged.

If you start fermenting vegetables you will be in good company – Captain Cook was recognised by the Royal Society for having conquered scurvy among his crew by sailing with large quantities of





citrus fruit and sauerkraut. On his second circumnavigation in the 1770s, sixty barrels of sauerkraut lasted twenty-seven months, and not a single crew member developed scurvy, which had previously killed huge numbers on long trips.

SAUERKRAUT

INGREDIENTS

- 1 head of cabbage
- 1 tbsp caraway seeds
- 2 tbsp salt

SEREN'S TIP!



Clean absolutely everything – when fermenting anything, it's best to give the good, beneficial bacteria every chance of succeeding by starting off with as clean an environment as possible.

METHOD

- 1 Discard any wilting or damaged outer leaves of the cabbage – reserve one good, intact, large outer leaf for use later – then cut the cabbage into very thin ribbons; I use a mandoline slicer, but a sharp knife works fine.
- 2 Combine the cabbage, salt and caraway seeds in a large ceramic bowl and begin working the salt into the cabbage by massaging and squeezing it with your hands. At first it may not seem like enough salt, but gradually the cabbage begins to release its juices and looks a bit like coleslaw. Patience is necessary, as the process takes 5–10 minutes.
- 3 Take handfuls of cabbage and pack them tightly into a sterilised jar. Tamp it down well with your fist and pour any liquid released by the cabbage while you were massaging it into the jar.
- 4 Over the next 24 hours, press down on the cabbage every so often with a spoon. As it releases more liquid it becomes more limp and compact, and the liquid rises over the top of the cabbage.



- 5 As soon as the cabbage has released enough liquid to cover it, place the larger outer leaf of the cabbage reserved earlier over the surface of the sliced cabbage. This helps keep it submerged in its own liquid.
- 6 If, after 24 hours, the liquid has *not* risen above the cabbage, dissolve 1 teaspoon of salt in $\frac{1}{4}$ pint of water and add enough liquid to the jar to submerge the cabbage.
- 7 The cabbage needs to ferment for 3–10 days, away from direct sunlight and at a cool room temperature. A small batch of sauerkraut ferments quicker than a large batch – closer to 3 days than 10 days. Keep an eye on it and press it down if it starts floating *above* the liquid.
- 8 Taste it after 3 days, and when it tastes good to you, refrigerate it. It's all about taste, so the duration of the fermentation will depend on what your taste buds require.

SEREN'S TIPS!



- * Don't worry if you see bubbles coming through the cabbage while fermenting, or foam on top, or white scum – these are all signs of a healthy fermentation process. Scum can be skimmed off during fermentation or before refrigerating. However, check there is no mould forming, as this is something we do not want to be consuming.
- * As sauerkraut is a fermented food it will keep for at least 2 months in the fridge. As long as it still tastes and smells good to eat, it will be fine.
- * Store your sauerkraut at a cool room temperature; at high temperatures it can become unappetisingly mushy, or it can go off.

LACTO-FERMENTED CARROTS WITH GINGER

Fermented carrots are great for livening up a simple salad sandwich, and are delicious with hummus. I use different varieties of carrot to get a multicoloured, pretty looking jar, but any fresh carrots will do.

INGREDIENTS

- 680g carrots, trimmed and quartered
- A 2.5cm piece of root ginger, peeled and thinly sliced
- 2 tbsp salt
- 1 cabbage leaf (optional)
- 850ml warm water

METHOD

- 1 Combine the salt and water in a measuring jug, then stir until the salt dissolves.
- 2 Put the ginger in the bottom of a sterilised 1.5-litre preserving jar, then place the carrots in the jar in an upright position.
- 3 Pour the brine over the carrots, leaving at least 2.5cm of headspace at the top of the jar. If necessary, add more water to cover the vegetables. (Optionally, tuck a cabbage leaf over the vegetables to hold them under the brine.)
- 4 Cover the jar tightly and let it stand at room temperature – open it every few days to release any gases produced during fermentation. Any mould or scum can also be skimmed off. The carrots usually take 7–10 days to ferment – they should be crunchy, tart, and slightly zingy.

SEREN'S TIP!



Use only salt free from iodine and/or anti-caking agents, which can inhibit fermentation – rock salt contains neither.

Happy fermenting!

SUPERFOODS

We check 'em out!

Dave Hamilton dons his white lab coat and specs to check out the **hype** about **superfoods** – could they help you **live for ever**, or do they just have **great PR**?

INTRODUCTION

The term 'superfood' was coined a hundred years ago in Kingston, Jamaica, when a journalist at *The Daily Gleaner* used the term with reference to wine. Over the years it has cemented itself into the English language to describe any kind of nutrient-rich food, the consumption of which is said to be beneficial to our health. A hundred years and a hundred food fads later, the term is still in daily usage.

All fresh fruit and vegetables contain beneficial vitamins and minerals, but the advocates of superfoods claim they are particularly dense in certain nutrients, and therefore a must in our diets. Is there something substantial in these claims and are superfoods a super way to stay super healthy, or is the hype simply overblown?

To help decide I have taken some of the better-known superfoods and put them in a head-to-head battle against some more common, everyday fruit and vegetables.



BLUEBERRIES v. RASPBERRIES

One of the oldest and perhaps best-known superfoods has to be the blueberry. These little berries are said to be a good source of vitamin C and other antioxidants, but other fruits also contain them, so how do blueberries compare with that old allotment favourite, the raspberry?

At first glance it would seem that the raspberry is a clear winner. It is higher in fibre, lower in sugar and higher in vitamin C than the blueberry. Despite the raspberry containing nearly twice the amount of potassium, neither really has a significant amount of this nutrient for a fair comparison. However, the blueberry does contain significantly more of the antioxidant compound known as anthocyanin (see Terms), and more vitamin K than the raspberry.

Depending on the season, the prices of both blueberries and raspberries can fluctuate dramatically, although there is often very little difference in price between them. The result therefore has to be a tie. With each berry having such positive health claims, it is hard to say if one is a clear winner over the other. If there was only space on an allotment or vegetable patch for one, I would choose the raspberry. It is easier to grow and just as healthy as the blueberry. However, if you can, I would advise growing blueberries in pots alongside the raspberry, as a mix of these two berries will lead to a broad range of nutrients, leading to a more balanced diet. If you have to choose between them, just ask yourself which one you prefer to eat.

BLUEBERRIES v. RASPBERRIES

	RASPBERRY (100g)	BLUEBERRY (100g)
POTASSIUM	151mg/4% D.V.	77mg/2% D.V.
VITAMIN C	26.2mg/43% D.V.	9.7mg/16% D.V.
SUGAR	4.4g	10g
ANTHOCYANIN (ANTIOXIDANT)	365mg	558mg
FIBRE	6g/24% D.V.	2.4g/9% D.V.
VITAMIN K	8 micrograms/9% D.V.	16.5 micrograms/18.3% D.V.
GROWING	Once established, grows like a weed. Grows in most soil types	Needs an ericaceous (acidic) soil. Best grown in a pot
COST TO BUY FRESH	££	££

SWEET POTATOES v. CARROTS

Sweet potatoes are the second most common superfood to adorn the shelves of our supermarkets and greengrocers. Packed with beta-carotene, which converts in the system to vitamin A, a vitamin which helps boost the immune system, they surely must be a superhero amongst superfoods! I have pitched the sweet potato against another vegetable as orange as David Dickinson – that other old allotment favourite, the carrot.

D.V. = Daily Value

A large glass jar with a metal clasp lid is filled with granola, sitting on a blue patterned cloth. Next to it is a smaller glass jar, also with a clasp lid, containing a white liquid, likely milk. In the foreground, a light blue bowl is filled with granola, with a silver spoon resting inside. The granola consists of various nuts, seeds, and dried fruits. The background is a warm, out-of-focus wooden surface.

Terms

* **ANTIOXIDANT**

A term used to describe a compound which binds with, and therefore neutralises, highly reactive free radicals.

* **FREE RADICALS**

Unstable reactive molecules which can attack and can cause damage to living cells. These can emerge in the body after exposure to pollution, smoking, radiation and certain foods, and have been linked to incidences of cancer, heart disease and stroke.

* **ANTHOCYANIN**

A pigment found in blue and red fruits, including blueberries, blackcurrants, grapes and cherries, and in vegetables such as aubergines. It is a well-known antioxidant thought to be beneficial to health and protective against disease.

SWEET POTATOES v. CARROTS

	SWEET POTATO (100g)	CARROT (100g)
POTASSIUM	337mg/9% D.V.	320mg/9% D.V.
FIBRE	3g/12% D.V.	2.8g/11% D.V.
BETA-CAROTENE	11.5mg (over 100% D.V.)	8.3mg (over 100% D.V.)
VITAMIN C	2.4g/4% D.V.	5.9g/9% D.V.
GROWING	Grown from slips, they need a lot of room. Choose hardy cultivars and grow in a warm, sheltered position	Grown from seed, keep well weeded. There can be a number of harvests per year, depending on the variety. Net to protect from carrot root fly.
COST TO BUY FRESH	£££	£

The carrot is a winner! It actually came as something of a surprise to me that there was little difference between the carrot and the sweet potato in terms of nutrition. Both had comparable amounts of potassium and fibre, and the sweet potato is a lot higher in beta-carotene, so it may be beneficial as part of a balanced diet. However, the carrot contained over twice as much vitamin C, and it is certainly a lot cheaper to buy. It is also a lot easier to grow, and can be sown as early as February and harvested as late as October. Compare that with the expensive, short-seasoned sweet potato, and the carrot is a clear winner.

D.V. = Daily Value

described as 'among the healthiest foods on the planet'. Like many superfoods, they come with an exotic tale, having been used extensively by those two most product-endorsing of all ancient

CHIA SEEDS v. SUNFLOWER SEEDS, SESAME SEEDS AND FLAX SEEDS

Relatively new kids on the block, chia seeds (pictured right) have been



civilizations, the Mayans and the Aztecs – it's a real shame we don't hear just what the Picts and the Celts ate!

Chia seeds are high in calcium, high in fibre, and contain high amounts of omega oils, and I have decided to put them up against three other seeds – the easily grown sunflower seed, the cheap to buy but harder to grow (if not impossible in the UK) sesame seed, and the flax seed, which is reasonably expensive to buy but can be grown in the UK.

CHIA SEEDS v. SUNFLOWER SEEDS, SESAME SEEDS & FLAX SEEDS

	CHIA SEEDS (100g)	SUNFLOWER SEEDS (100g)	SESAME SEEDS (100g)	FLAX SEEDS (100g)
FIBRE	34g/136% D.V.	9g/36% D.V.	12g/48% D.V.	27g/108% D.V.
PROTEIN	17g/34% D.V.	21g/42% D.V.	18g/36% D.V.	18g/36% D.V.
CALCIUM	631mg/63% D.V.	78mg/7% D.V.	975mg/97% D.V.	255mg/25% D.V.
IRON	7.7mg/42% D.V.	5.2mg/28% D.V.	14.6mg/81% D.V.	5.7mg/31% D.V.
OMEGA-3	17,554mg	73mg	375.69mg	22,812.59mg
OMEGA-6	5,786mg	23,047mg	21,372mg	5,911mg
COST	££££	££	£	££
GROWING	Does not set seed in the UK	Easy to grow – some cultivars produce very abundant heads	Can't be grown in the UK	Can be grown in the UK





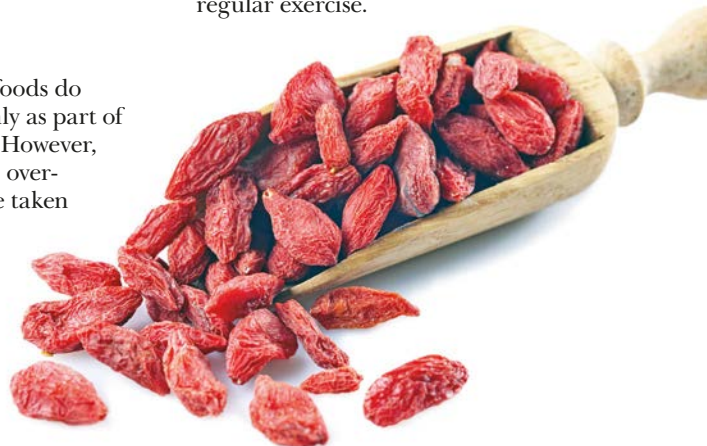
As chia seed costs a small fortune and cannot be grown in the UK, I would be reluctant to score it above either cheaper or home-grown seed. Sunflowers, pumpkins (not listed here) and flax can all be grown in the UK, so my advice would be to either grow or buy a mix of seeds rather than buying into this particular superfood fad.

CLAIMS FOR OTHER FOODS

The subject of superfoods is a very large and fascinating one. Unfortunately, there simply isn't the room to go through every food in detail. If you wish to research the subject in more depth, my advice would be to find an impartial source. Remember, if a company or a magazine endorses a superfood or food supplement, they are quite likely to be biased.

FINAL VERDICT

It would seem that superfoods do have their benefits, but only as part of a healthy and varied diet. However, their health claims may be over-exaggerated and should be taken with a figurative pinch of salt – table rather than pink Himalayan rock salt. If you can afford it, there is certainly no harm in buying these foods, but they should not be seen



Above: Wheatgrass juice.

Below left: Baked mackerel.

Below: Dried goji berries.

as a panacea or a cure-all for modern living. In other words, a bag of crisps and 20 Rothmans, together with a spirulina tablet, are really no substitute for healthy fresh vegetables and regular exercise.

The result? It's always best to have a wide mix of seeds. The most important claim for chia seed is its high amounts of omega-3. It is believed that we evolved to need a near equal balance of omega-3 and omega-6, but our Western diet has led to us consuming a diet much higher in omega-6. Chia seed does contain significant amounts of omega-3, but not as much as flax seed. Chia seed is also a good source of calcium, making it useful for those who avoid eating dairy due to lactose intolerance or a vegan diet. However, a 100g portion of sesame seeds contains nearly 100% of the daily requirement of calcium. Chia seeds, despite providing a more than healthy amount, give us around one-third less calcium than sesame seeds. Sunflower seeds didn't perform as well as the other seeds, but can be grown very easily and still contain useful amounts of all the vital nutrients.

OTHER SUPERFOODS

SUPERFOOD	DIETICIAN'S ADVICE	ALLOTMENT ALTERNATIVE
Goji berry	Health claims are weak. It's better to have a wide range of fruit and vegetables	Can be grown on allotments, or you could grow less fashionable blackcurrants/redcurrants
Oily fish	Good for omega-3, and can be from cheaper mackerel (choose sustainable line-caught) rather than salmon. Two portions a week are recommended	N/A
Wheatgrass juice	There is little or no evidence to support any claims	Carrot juice is high in beta-carotene, and carrots are easy to grow
Spirulina	Can be a good source of vitamin K and protein. Possible health risks attached to contaminated batches. A varied healthy diet is healthier	Cabbage and other brassicas are a good source of vitamin K, and legumes (peas and beans) are a good source of protein

WIND POWER

Going 'off Grid'

At a time of high energy uncertainty, **Phill Dennison** of **Renewable Motion** looks at the **requirements** and the **reasons** for going 'off Grid'

At the moment there seems to be a complete fixation with 'on Grid' wind power – and 'on Grid' solar too, for that matter. We're all too often blinded by a promise of untold wealth from the Grid as payback, when in reality the facts are often far from this. The average cost of a Microcertification Generation Scheme (MCS) accredited wind turbine is around £30,000 fitted. That's a heck of a lot of cash for most people!

The main reason for this high price tag is not the turbines themselves – to be honest, give or take a few watts, most modern turbines could do the job to a greater or lesser degree. The reason for the exorbitant cost comes down to one thing: the cost of MCS certification, which can run into many thousands of pounds, but as this certification is the only way you can sell your surplus power back to the Grid, they quite simply have you over a barrel. At least that is the way it is often perceived, and sometimes sold, but there is another way – going off Grid.

In a nutshell, going off Grid is akin to having your own power station, and producing your own power for your own use. Add a bit of solar power generation into the mix, and when you see the cost differential between on Grid and off Grid, it all starts to make sense.

So, what is the price difference? Well, as I said before, the average on Grid 'windy' will set you back the thick end of £30,000 or more, but a half-decent 5kW



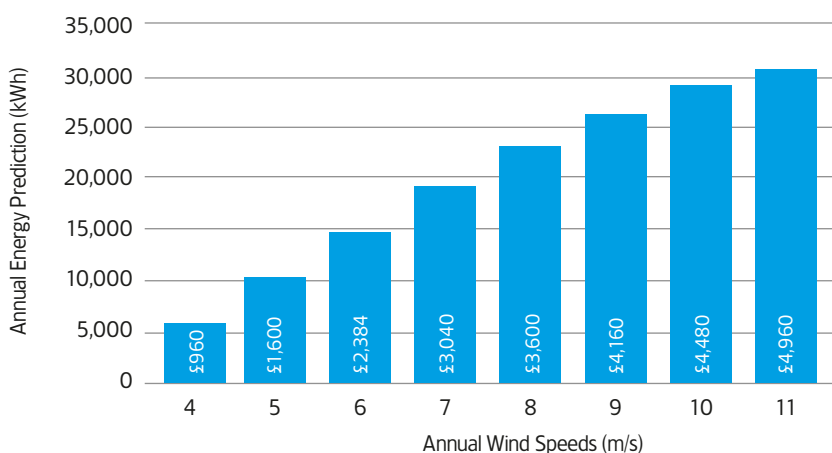
Far top right: A small domestic installation – ideal where space is short.

Right: A small wind turbine at Machynlleth in Wales. Photo © Tobi Kellner.

Far right: A small domestic installation.

Left: A vertical axis wind turbine.

ANNUAL ENERGY PREDICTION (for a 5kW wind turbine)



Cash sums relate to electricity generated 'off Grid' or 'payback' if 'on Grid'.



off Grid version could be up and running for well under £10,000. But before you rush out and start building your own wind farm, there are one or two further issues that require consideration. None of them are insurmountable by any means, but they do need to be dealt with before you can begin digging out the foundations for your turbine.

The first and main potential stumbling block is that old chestnut, planning regulations. Just how easy it is to get past this stage comes down to various factors, not least how many trees your own local council likes to hug. In most cases it could be done under normal building regulations rather than going through the full planning process, but you really must check this out, and at the very outset. Most people will require help or at least coaching, and not because they don't know what they are talking about – rather that any application needs to be made in a particular way if it is to succeed.

This is also helped by local knowledge and understanding when making the application.

Once you have done this, and found a good spot for your turbine, off you go. Most turbines are actually fairly easy to fit, either by yourself or by your chosen supplier. The final connection, however, should always be done by a qualified 'sparky', but the rest should not be too difficult for a half-handly DIY'er.

You will also need to decide what size of turbine you need. Domestic turbines start at around

2kW and go up to... well, as big and expensive as you want.

However, most people should be happy with around 5kW. The average house uses about 5,000kWh per year, and your average 5kW 'windy' will give you about 20,000kWh per year – sufficient to provide more than enough extra power to use in a commercial setting – but in a windy coastal spot it could produce considerably more. It's always better to underestimate than overestimate – that way you won't be disappointed.

The cheapest way to fit a wind turbine is using a cable tower, but this can be a bit of a pain if you have limited space, in which case a free-standing tower would usually be better. So, what do you need to do the job? Well, the essentials are a wind turbine (of course), a controller to keep a handle on the power, a set of batteries to store your new source of energy, and, finally, an inverter to convert all your battery power into useable power. It's worth investing in a good quality battery set-up. Cheap batteries are a false economy, and the price difference isn't that great, so it's better to spend a

"DOMESTIC TURBINES START AT AROUND 2kW AND GO UP TO... WELL, AS BIG AND EXPENSIVE AS YOU WANT"



Important!

Most turbines are fairly easy to install, but the final connection, however, should always be done by a qualified electrician!

few more quid on good batteries and get many more years life from them. On average, a good set-up should last at least six years. As regards inverters, a pure sine wave inverter will always be the best choice if you are going to run anything other than a jackhammer, as its power is much 'cleaner' than a cheap inverter.

The position of the turbine is probably the single most important decision you need to make, so a good site survey will be worth its weight in gold, and will certainly be carried out by any reputable company. It's always going to be a bit of a compromise between keeping the turbine away from buildings and the need to keep it close enough to reduce any power loss from long cable runs. However, overall it should not be too great a problem, as most modern turbines are fairly quiet due to major advances in

Above: A small, roof wind turbine. Photo © Andol.

Below left: A small turbine near Ben Lomond supplying power to an electric fence. Photo © W. F. Millar.

Below middle: A small domestic wind turbine. Photo © Nigel Chadwick.

blade design. The land required is, in reality, very small, as the actual turbine itself leaves only a very small footprint, especially with a free-standing tower without rope cable support.

The single greatest factor that prevents a turbine from being a realistic proposition is a bad site – certain obstructions just cannot be overcome, but many traditional problems can be worked around using a vertical axis wind turbine, which can actually work with disturbed wind patterns. Another potential problem can be

overoptimistic predictions by potential suppliers keen on doing business, so do a bit of homework, and the age-old mantra still applies – if something really does look too good to be true...

However, once you begin to look into the possibilities, it becomes quite an eye-opener, and with the current energy market bedevilled by much uncertainty about everything from price to the potential dangers of fracking, it's certainly food for thought. Given the right situation, the benefits are plain to see with a 5kWh wind turbine working well. For a relatively modest investment you could be almost, if not totally, mains free, and by adding a bit of solar into the mix it could be not only good for the planet, but also good for your bank balance too.



FURTHER INFO

You can contact Phill Dennison at Renewable Motion on 07825 589421 or email: renewablemotion@gmail.com

www.renewablemotion.co.uk

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WELDING

An introduction

Home Farmer's own fixer, **John Butterworth**, gets out his **welding gear** to **repair a cement mixer** and a **pair of loppers**

This next piece in our series on 'fixing stuff' is an introduction to welding – specifically using the two commonly available amateur welders: a 'Metal Inert Gas' or MIG welder, and an electric arc welder. More specifically still, we used the MIG to repair the cracked steel frame of a cement mixer, and the arc welder to repair a set of garden loppers. Both would otherwise have been scrapped – anathema to the home farmer!

MIG WELDING – FIXING A CEMENT MIXER

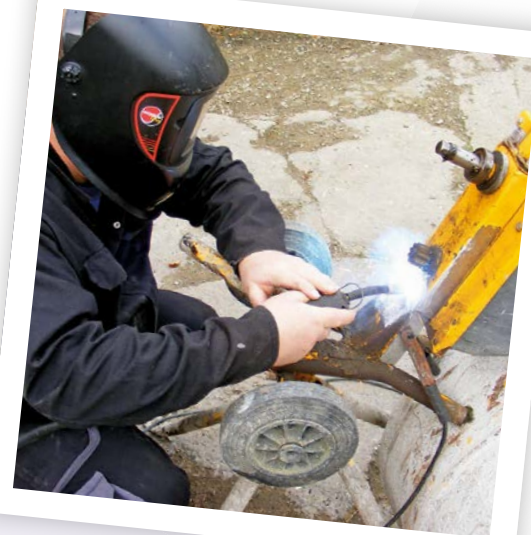
The frame on my mixer is thin-gauge steel, which is why it cracked in the first place, so a small MIG welder is called for. The mixer fell over when full of cement, and the frame bent, then cracked when I straightened it. It's such flimsy stuff that

my Cement Mixer Repair Consultant (Paul, who owns the MIG) decreed that it should have the crack welded up and then a metal patch welded over the top to strengthen it.

First, we had to be able to get at the broken part, which meant unscrewing an Allen bolt at the back of the drum, then removing the drum. The whole area needed grinding down to shiny, clean metal (see image 2 on page 94); and yes, we *should* be wearing gloves!

The welding wire is copper-coated mild steel, which comes on a reel and has to be fed through a pipe to the gun nozzle, so we can touch it onto the joint to be welded. An earth clamp is attached to a nice shiny part of the mixer's frame, which now becomes a cathode, or negative

terminal. The wire forms the anode, or positive terminal. When the wire is held fractionally above the steel we're welding, an electric arc jumps across the gap, melting the wire and the steel of the mixer. This gives a raised pool of molten



SOLDERING, BRAZING OR WELDING?

These are all ways of sticking metal together, but there's often confusion as to which is which. We covered making soldered joints when we looked at plumbing and at electrical connectors on our duff vacuum cleaner; it's a way of *coating* two metal parts – typically copper joints for plumbing, or copper wires for electrical work – with a soft metal called *solder*, which is mostly lead, and then melting some more lead between the coated parts to stick them together. It's a lot like a hot-melt glue: when it cools and hardens, the parts are stuck together. The solder melts, but the copper parts don't, and an electric soldering iron or a cheap, gas

blowlamp will generate sufficient heat to melt solder.

Brazing is a hotter process (a minimum of 450°C), as the 'glue' (tougher metal, usually bronze) has a much higher melting point; the resulting joint is stronger than you could ever get with soft lead. The two metal parts being joined still don't melt though, and the 'brazing' bonds to each surface by a capillary action, very like in soldering.

Welding demands enough heat to *melt* the metal parts being joined (at least 2,700°C), along with a welding filler metal (a steel rod or wire), but you get a much *stronger* joint;

the parts being joined are fused together, becoming a single piece. This is what we're going to use to fix stuff in this article.

Now, there are two major snags with temperatures high enough to fuse metals: one is that thinner steels tend to distort with the heat; the other (worse one) is that the metals 'oxidise' as oxygen rushes into the hot bit, and this stops the metals from fusing properly. Distortion is minimised by turning the current down on the (electric) welders; oxidation is avoided by keeping oxygen out of the joint, with either a 'flux' material, or an inert gas such as carbon dioxide, as you'll see.



FURTHER INFO

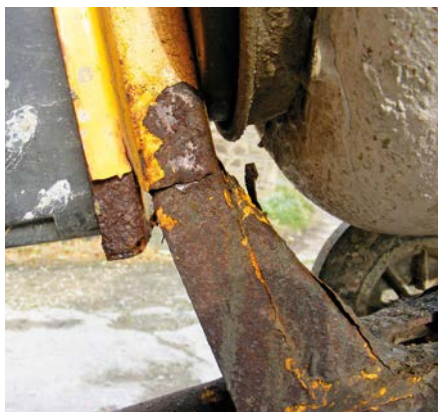
- * Visit sealey.co.uk for MIG and arc welders, and also for 'how to weld' information.
- * www.weldingtypes.net has some good 'how to' information, too.
- * Best of all, buy or borrow a welder and safety kit and practise on scrap parts!

“WHEN THEY’RE TOUCHED TOGETHER YOU GET A DIRTY GREAT ARC OF ELECTRICITY AT ABOUT 6,000°C – ENOUGH TO MELT THE WORKPIECE AND THE WELDING ROD AND FUSE THEM TOGETHER”

Safety!

When welding, you **must** protect your eyes with a proper mask, and you **should** wear gloves, a leather apron and arm guards.

MIG WELDING – FIXING THE MIXER



1. The crack in the frame.



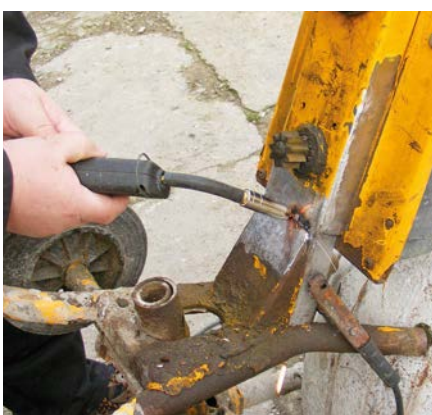
2. Cleaning the rust and paint off.



3. Loading wire into the gas MIG welder.



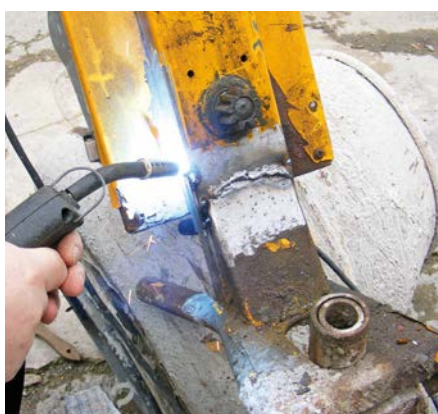
4. Feeding the wire through.



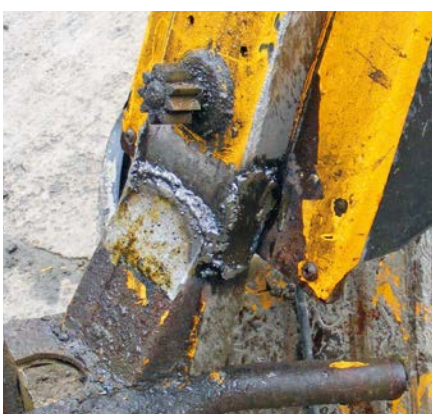
5. Starting to weld the mixer.



6. A strengthening plate and welding clamp.



7. Welding a plate in place.



8. The finished repair.



9. It works again!

metal, and the nozzle is moved along the crack, with a slightly wavy motion, to make a neat 'weld'.

More wire is automatically fed out as you go along, and the 'inert gas' is fed from the same nozzle. Once Paul had run a seam of weld round the crack, we cut out a couple of pieces of mild steel to use as strengthening plates. These were clamped in place. A couple of dabs on the corners held the plate in place, then the

clamp could be removed, and the plate welded right round without the clamp getting in the way. In image 7 you can see small beads of weld under the seam that has been welded – this is called 'sputtering', and it cleans off very easily when the job is complete. Now it was time to clean up with a wire brush, angle grinder or file, or a mixture of each! You'll note that this is not the neatest welding in the world – it would probably

not win any beauty competitions – but the main thing is that it worked, and the mixer is well and truly fixed. To prove the point, I mixed up a load of concrete with it!

I've painted over the bare steel with red oxide paint to stop it rusting. We've got the frame dead square (it was sort of drooping before, causing the drum to foul on the frame). It's done about ten loads since the fix, so all is well with the weld.

ARC WELDING – MENDING A PAIR OF LOPPERS

I probably wouldn't have tried to repair these if I wasn't doing this article – I assumed they were beyond fixing. It just goes to show. Anyway, image 1 shows my own arc welder, which is pretty long in the tooth now (like me), but it's still working (again, like me). There's no gas involved, as I've said – the means of preventing oxidation of the steel being 'flux' coating the welding rods. The rods (see image 2) should not have been allowed to rust, by the way, as rust – oxidation of the surface – makes for poor current flow. They belong to a mate who's borrowed my welder (a lot of this goes on with welders), and they're *his* rods, but still – keep them dry and they won't rust.

As with the MIG welder, one of the two electrical leads is the 'negative' connector, and is attached to the workpiece with an earth clamp, like a large crocodile clip. The other lead has an electrode holder, or 'gun', on the end, and the end of the welding rod with no flux coating (let's call it the 'rusty end') is inserted in that. The other end of the rod, which is fully coated with flux, is now 'positive', so when it's tapped on the workpiece to strike an arc, current will flow between the tip of the welding rod, the workpiece, and back to the welder via the earth clamp.

I filed off any rust from the broken ends of the loppers and then put the parts together, with weights holding them in place. I attached the earth clamp to the loppers. Images 5 and 6 show the phenomenon that you get with an arc welder, but hardly at all with the MIG, and that's 'slag' forming on the weld. It's deceptive, in that it looks like weld metal, but it's not – it's the flux residue! Chip it off to reveal the real weld underneath, which may or may not be a weld of integrity. In this case it's pretty good; if it wasn't, I wouldn't be showing you, would I? Use a cold chisel or similar to chip it off; it's very tough stuff. At this point I turned the loppers over and welded the other side using the same process.

ARC WELDING – MENDING THE LOPPERS



1. An arc welder.



2. Arc-welding rods.



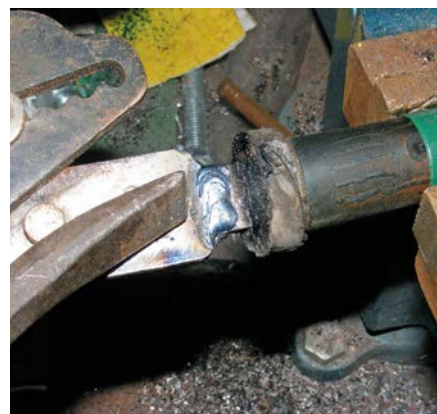
3. The electrode holder and the earth clamp.



4. Ready to be welded – note earth clamp, bottom right.



5. An arc weld with slag.



6. The arc weld with the slag chipped off.

“AS WITH THE MIG WELDER, ONE OF THE TWO ELECTRICAL LEADS IS THE ‘NEGATIVE’ CONNECTOR, AND IS ATTACHED TO THE WORKPIECE WITH AN EARTH CLAMP, LIKE A LARGE CROCODILE CLIP”



Inside an auto-darkening helmet.

SAFETY

You *should* wear gloves, a leather apron and arm guards, as hot metal is being splattered around (Paul, take note!), and you really *must* protect your eyes with a proper welding mask. The old-fashioned mask is simply very dark glass, so you can only see when the arc strikes up, and you also have to hold it up to your face with one hand. Forget that type – they're rubbish! Get a battery-powered 'auto-darkening' mask, or better still, a helmet that you can see through to safely strike the arc, but which then instantly dims to protect your eyes. This type of helmet covers your whole head and face too, to protect it from molten metal splatter, and it leaves both hands free to control the gun. They cost about £50.

COSTS

You can get all sizes of both MIG and arc welders. Those I've described are quite small and reasonably cheap, so they're well worth having for the home farm. For example, the 140-amp MIG (or one very like it) costs about £220 online, the small bottles of CO₂ are about £10, and the welding wire about £10 a drum; a new cement mixer like the one we mended (a Mastermix MC130) costs £300 from Wickes. So, we've mended the mixer and still got the welder to fix more stuff! I'd call that excellent economics.

A Sealey 180-amp arc welder is even cheaper, at less than £140, and a bunch of ten rods (get various sizes to experiment with) is just a few pounds. Once you have fixed a few items, it'll have paid for itself.

Types of welder

Described below are the various types of welder, and where they might be used. I have provided more details about the MIG and the electric arc welders earlier in the article, as these are the easiest to use by the amateur.

* OXYACETYLENE (Commonly referred to as 'gas welding')

You've no doubt seen the two large gas bottles on a little trolley in your local garage. These are a bit like chainsaws, in that you should be properly trained to use them or they will bite back. Very often used for cutting rather than welding, and rarely used for welding steel these days, more for brazing copper and bronze, this type of welder can tackle very delicate aluminium, oddly enough, given the size of the gear. The process is cooler than electric arc welding (about 2,700°C), so the workpieces distort less.

* TIG WELDING (TIG stands for 'Tungsten Inert Gas')

This type of welding needs a similar level of expertise to oxyacetylene.

* ELECTRIC ARC WELDING (Also known as 'stick welding')

This is the simplest kit, being just a big, variable output transformer, producing DC at a very high current. This DC is applied across the piece of metal to be welded by means of an earth clamp, the 'cathode', or 'negative' terminal, and a piece of welding rod, which forms the 'anode', or 'positive' terminal. When they're touched together you get a dirty great arc of electricity at about 6,000°C – enough to melt the workpiece *and* the welding rod and fuse them together. The welding rod is coated in flux, a material that stops the joint from oxidising. This is most often used for thicker steels, say 3mm and up. You end up with a layer of 'slag' on top of your weld, which has to be chipped off to see if your weld was actually successful in making a good joint.

* MIG WELDING (MIG stands for 'Metal Inert Gas')

Apparently, some years ago, the industry changed the name to GMAW (Gas Metal-Arc Welding), but the term MIG has stuck, as it were. This type of welding is used for thin- to medium-gauge metals – car manufacturers often use MIG welders to weld body panels together. Instead of flux, a gas – usually CO₂ (pictured below right) – is fed onto the weld to keep the oxygen off. Like arc welders, MIG welders can be purchased relatively cheaply, and can be mastered by the amateur (with practice!).



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SMALLHOLDER ASSOCIATIONS

NOT JUST FOR SMALLHOLDERS!

Smallholder Associations are a great way to meet like-minded people, share ideas, gain access to training, and in some cases share equipment. In almost all cases you don't have to be a 'smallholder' to become a member. Membership can be anything from £10–£20 a year.

Please note: **WHERE POSSIBLE WE HAVE INCLUDED TELEPHONE NUMBERS.** However, phone numbers are not always readily available – this is not because the organisations do not want you to contact them, more it's because the role is voluntary, with the people often doing a full-time job elsewhere. If any group listed below does have a phone number and we've not listed it, please email ruth@homefarmer.co.uk with a membership contact number so that we can include this in the future.

Although these are smallholder groups, most of them welcome anybody with a genuine love of the countryside. Our thanks go to Richard Thompson for the listings. Please follow Richard's blog (Small Plot, Big Ideas) for inspiration <http://smallplotbigideas.co.uk/>.

Please remember to mention Home Farmer when contacting these organisations. Many thanks.

BASH – BIGGAR AREA SMALLHOLDERS

A group of like-minded people all of whom work the land in some way. The smallholdings they run are diverse: some are small, others quite large; some grow only vegetables, others have significant amounts of livestock. www.bashsmallholders.co.uk.

CENTRAL SCOTLAND SMALLHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION

The CSSA are a group of aspiring and existing smallholders who get together to share knowledge, experiences, and to socialise. www.smallholders.webs.com.

CHESHIRE SMALLHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION

A dynamic and enthusiastic group of small-scale and hobby farmers, horse enthusiasts and countryside lovers. www.cheshiresmallholders.org.uk.

(CASP) CORNISH ASSOCIATION OF SMALLHOLDERS AND PRODUCERS

This is a group of smallholders and craft producers in the south-west with the aim of bringing support to each other and a shared outlet for the fine produce and crafts that are produced and sold locally to ensure quality and fair prices. www.cornishassociationsmallholdersandproducers.co.uk. For membership enquiries telephone 07886 839785.

CORNWALL SMALLHOLDERS GROUP

A group with members mainly in the Western half of Cornwall, with interests including all forms of livestock, orchards, veg and soft fruit, woodland, and the cooking and processing of produce. Meetings are held monthly, usually on the first Thursday of the month, with talks and discussions in winter and visits to members' holdings and elsewhere in summer, with home produced food and drink a key feature! Website is undergoing a revamp. For further information contact 07794 978693.

CUMBRIAN SMALLHOLDERS

A facebook group which provides a place to meet other smallholders, share information, advertise stock for sale and appeal for items wanted. www.facebook.com/groups/cumbriansmallholders.

DERBYSHIRE SMALLHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION

Derbyshire Smallholders' Association was formed by a group of like-minded people with the aim of providing the opportunity for fellow smallholders, and those with just an interest in smallholding, to network and to pass on skills and information. www.derbyshiresmallholders.co.uk. For membership enquiries telephone 07871 189889.

DEVON ASSOCIATION OF SMALLHOLDERS (DASH)

DASH was established in 1986 to serve the needs and interests of smallholders and those planning to undertake any kind of country living. www.devonsmallholders.co.uk.

DYFED SMALLHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION

The Dyfed Smallholders' Association has been active for over twenty-one years, and is one of the oldest smallholder groups in the UK. www.dyfedsmallholders.org.uk.

EAST ESSEX SMALLHOLDERS' GROUP

A group of micro farmers who operate different size 'smallholdings'; some of them have a few backyard chickens, maybe grow a few fruit or vegetables, while others may have a pig, small herds/flocks, sheep or even a cow. www.eastessexsmallholders.org.uk.

EAST RIDING SMALLHOLDERS' SOCIETY

A society of smallholders, 'home' farmers, small-scale agriculturalists, horticulturalists, self-sufficiency enthusiasts and country crafts people who have rural interests or are motivated to make productive their own small portion of the Earth's surface. For membership enquiries please telephone 01757 638155.

FENLAND GOATKEEPERS' & SMALLHOLDERS' CLUB

The Club was originally started as a goatkeepers' society in the early 1970s, but in October 1994 the Club was transformed into the more general smallholders' group it is today. Since then the membership has grown to over 140 families. www.fgsc.org.uk.

GUERNSEY SMALLHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION

The Guernsey Smallholders' Association is a practical and social club, which forms a network of people who can offer each other advice, support and help, and which also facilitates the exchange of produce, skills and ideas. www.guernseysmallholders.weebly.com.

HERTS & ESSEX SMALLHOLDERS AND GARDENERS

The group holds informal friendly meetings once a month, and members have a wide range of expertise on smallholding and gardening issues. www.hertsandessexsmallholders.org. Tel: 01279 815044.

KENT SMALLHOLDERS

The group was formed in 1987 by Hadlow College, to whom they are affiliated. They hold monthly meetings at the college with like-minded people who enjoy the countryside and the rural way of life, which is their only criteria for membership. www.kentsmallholders.co.uk.

LINCOLNSHIRE SMALLHOLDING AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY CLUB

The purpose of Lincolnshire Smallholding and Self-sufficiency Club is to bring together like-minded people within Lincolnshire who are interested or involved in any aspect of smallholding or self-sufficiency. www.lsssc.org.uk. Tel: 01205 290829.

MONTGOMERYSHIRE & DISTRICT SMALLHOLDERS

A friendly group of like-minded people who meet on a monthly basis, with guest speakers on a variety of subjects. New members and visitors are always welcome. We meet at Cobra Rugby Club in Meidod (Sat Nav SY22 6DA). Tel: Barrie 01691 648406 Email: mmrjd@btinternet.com

NORFOLK SMALLHOLDERS' TRAINING GROUP

NSTG was set up in the late 1980s by a group of volunteers and now has members all over Norfolk (and beyond). www.nstg.org.uk. Tel: 01953 483734.

NORTH SHROPSHIRE AND BORDERS SMALLHOLDERS' GROUP

A friendly group with varied interests – from window boxes to acres. Welcomes new members to their monthly meetings. www.northshrop-smallholder.co.uk

NORTH YORKSHIRE SMALLHOLDERS' SOCIETY

This group was set up to help the smallholders of North Yorkshire and the North of England. www.smallholder.org.uk.

NORTHUMBRIA SMALLHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION

A group of like-minded people from the north-east of England who enjoy the countryside and all that goes with it. The group formed following a smallholders' course at Kirkley Hall College. www.northumbriasmallholders.co.uk.

ROMFORD SMALLHOLDERS' SOCIETY

They run a very large and popular allotment site in Romford and have been providing allotments for over one hundred years. www.romfordsmallholders.wix.com/growyourrown.

SCOTTISH SMALLHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION

The Scottish Smallholders' Association has been established for over 15 years. They are a small group based in the south-west of Scotland, and their aim is to share knowledge, experience and ideas about smallholding, and they welcome anyone with shared interests.

SEVERNVALE SMALLHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION

A group of people whose main interests are: flora and fauna, the environment, conservation and organic growing. www.severnvalsmallholders.org.uk.

SHROPSHIRE SMALLHOLDERS' GROUP

A non-profit organisation providing members with information and mutual support on all aspects of smallholding, including animal husbandry, growing fruit and vegetables, and general smallholding interests. www.shropshiresmallholdersgroup.org.

SMALL FARM TRAINING GROUP

The Small Farm Training Group (SFTG), based in Sussex, aims to enable members to learn better farming, smallholding and horticultural skills. Members are enthusiasts who want to know how to care for land, livestock and equipment in an efficient and professional manner. www.sftg.co.uk.

SOMERSET SMALLHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION

The association was set up more than thirty years ago to bring together folk who have an interest in rural activities. Whether you have a flowerpot or a farm, you are welcome to join this friendly group of Somerset-based working smallholders. www.somersetsmallholders.org.uk. Tel: 07758 827869.

SOUTH WEST WALES SMALLHOLDERS

A facebook group page for all those who have a smallholding in SW Wales. You can advertise items for sale, or appeal for wanted items. www.facebook.com/groups/218380055007087.

STAFFORDSHIRE SMALLHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION

A small but lively group of families and individuals who share an interest in the small-farming way of life. www.staffsmallholders.info. Tel: 01889 881377.

SUFFOLK SMALLHOLDERS' SOCIETY

A non-profit group of like-minded people interested in smallholding, self-sufficiency, allotments, fruit and vegetable growing and animal husbandry on a small scale. www.suffolksmallholders.co.uk. Tel: 01449 711178.

WEST SUSSEX SMALLHOLDERS' CLUB

A friendly smallholders' support group serving West Sussex, East Sussex, Surrey and Hampshire. www.westsussexsmallholdersclub.org.uk. Tel: 01903 205470.

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